

INTERVIEW OF VALERIE BARABAN
FORBES MAGAZINE
JANUARY 29, 2022

France is represented in the United States by the ambassador in Washington, D.C., and by 10 consul generals posted throughout the country. The consulate general of France in Houston is one of these consular posts. It covers Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas. Additionally, the consulate general in Louisiana reports to the consulate general in Houston. The American south is often the subject of stereotypes, from the wide-open spaces and oil fields of Texas to the Native American reservations of Oklahoma and the rivers of Arkansas brimming with fish. However, contrary to the stereotypes, this region is experiencing dramatic demographic [1] and economic growth. This is particularly true in the “Texas Triangle,” which is demarcated by Houston, Austin, San Antonio and Dallas. The region is becoming a growth center at a time when California is facing numerous challenges.

Valérie Baraban has served as Consul General of France in Houston since September 2021. She is the first woman and the first credentialed philosophy professor to hold this position. After teaching at the University of California and in France, she began her diplomatic career 15 years ago. She has worked in strategic affairs, security and defense and has held positions at the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and NATO as well as in the French administration. Additionally, she headed the French Cooperation and Cultural Affairs Network in China.

The consul general spoke with Forbes about her experience in Houston thus far and shared her take on Texas and the region’s relationship with France.

Madam Consul General, after your successful diplomatic career in Europe and China, what motivated you to come here to Houston?

I taught for two years at the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of California, Davis, in the mid-1990s. It was a fascinating experience because back then, California was the center of technological, political and social innovation. From university campuses to Silicon Valley, the Bay Area was one big laboratory for global society in the Internet era. I was also studying Chinese and took my first trip to China in 1991. For me, the west coast had the great advantage of being the

Pacific and Asia-facing part of the United States. You could already sense that China was emerging as a global power. From the outset, I wanted to get to know the two strategic players whose future rivalry was already in sight.

More recently, in the early 2020s, Texas was the place that was calling to me. What I’ve experienced here since my arrival has proven that my intuition was right. As the Californian model is reaching its limits, Texas is stepping into the role of the country’s demographic, economic, political and cultural laboratory. Here, you can tell that everything has yet to be built and developed. The future is wide open and there are opportunities to be seized. The fact that established tech companies like Hewlett Packard and Oracle have moved from California to Texas is an early indicator of change. Elon Musk’s arrival with Tesla and SpaceX will also have a major impact. Houston, the oil capital, plans to hold onto its position as a global leader during the energy transition and it has the resources to do so since it has the infrastructure, innovation and expertise it needs to physically undergo an industrial transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy. Houston is also the most ethnically diverse city in the United States. It’s a hub for immigration from other parts of the United States and from Mexico just over the border but also from other countries. Furthermore, Houston’s consular network is the third largest in the United States, with over 100 foreign representations. This dynamic has led to major urban development projects, such as the new innovation district around the Houston accelerator hub, the Ion, and the urban campuses of major tech companies in Austin. I feel the same way that I did in China: this is a land under construction, in all senses of the word: conceptual, economic and social. It’s thrilling!

You’ve painted a very detailed portrait of the United States. Is the role of the consul general to serve as the eyes and ears of France?

It’s true that diplomats serve as a bridge between their home country and their host country. First of all, the host country, my job is to help people get to know France better, including its strengths and its ability to innovate. It’s also my job to report back to Paris with my observations and ideas, under the supervision of the ambassador. As a consul general, you have to find your footing very quickly in your new place of residence, form relationships with leaders and local communities and find the tools that you need in order to understand the country from the inside out. This is true of any diplomat but it is especially true when you are the head of post

because you represent and embody your home country in your interactions abroad.

This role is even more important in Texas since, more often than not, people only know the stereotypes. Texas makes the news for things like the abortion ban, mass killings, the death penalty or the circulation of weapons. Texas is well known for its stance on certain issues. But what about everything else? Stereotypes don't allow for nuance and they don't capture the true dynamics. It would be a real mistake to ignore Texas. This state is the size of France and its GDP is on par with Russia's GDP. Let's not forget too that several American presidents came from Texas. We need to allow the dynamics on the ground to shake up our set, conservative perception of Texas, open our eyes and allow us to see the opportunities here. That's the perspective that I try to share.

Are the mayors of these big Texan cities good advocates for France?

I would describe them as people we can have conversations with and partner with. When I arrived in Texas, one of the first things that I did was meet with the mayors of Houston, Austin and Dallas. I hope I'll also have the chance to meet with the mayors of Fort Worth, San Antonio and other cities soon. All these cities are international and include international considerations in their development approach, each of them in their own way. As I already mentioned, Houston is home to 90% of consular representations and is fully aware of the value of this diplomatic presence. Sylvester Turner, who is in his second term as mayor, is proud of this fact and knows how to leverage it. In order to keep up with Houston, Dallas plans to shirk its more provincial reputation by doubling down on its international business relations, which are not focused on industry so much as fields like investment, finance, trade, insurance and logistics. Austin, with its identity as a cultural and digital hub, would like to expand business in tech, academia and culture.

Do you have other partners in addition to the mayors?

Universities are key partners because they are the center of innovation and development in the U.S., even more so than in France, I think. They are powerful players who invest in cities and in society and they serve as hubs and bridges between academic research and businesses. In my district, the first universities that come to mind are Rice University in Houston and the University of Texas at Austin. There are also universities like the University of Houston,

Texas A&M University in College Station near Austin and Southern Methodist University in Dallas, for example.

Cultural organizations are important partners too. I'm thinking of the Menil Collection, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and the Dallas Museum of Art, to name a few. I'm struck by the quality and number of first-tier museums in my district and by how many French pieces there are in their collections. At the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, for example, no sooner do visitors set foot in the museum than they find themselves face to face with incredible pieces by artists like Bonnard, Monet, Manet, Matisse and Cézanne. The same goes for other museums. Whether it's the visual arts, music or theater, when French people come to Texas, they discover that there's a very rich cultural scene here with a clear love of French art. Texas is home to loyal friends of the Louvre!

The French business community also gives us real leverage here thanks to its dynamism and its close connections with local businesses. This community comprises different members: the French Chamber of Commerce, the French Foreign Trade Advisors (CCEs), Business France and French Tech, which is active in Houston and Austin. My role is to structure and coordinate their projects so that French businesses stay aligned with our national priorities. France has extensive expertise in many different fields but we need a shared strategic vision. It is my job as Consul to provide them with that.

France is known for being a cultural standout. Is France's expertise in technology, industry and business also given its due?

That is actually one of my goals. I want to promote the image of France as an innovative, modern, tech savvy leader in addition to the well-known image of France as a place with amazing heritage and culture. France's excellence in research, engineering and industry is recognized but we still need to improve access to those French ecosystems. More specifically, the investors, entrepreneurs and innovators in Texas are not aware enough of France's potential. For obvious reasons, the British and the Canadians are better established here.

Similarly, I have noticed that there are many French engineers working in the technical service departments of major energy companies, like Chevron, and tech companies in the U.S. France continues to be a country that trains the brains behind innovation. However, this resource slips between our fingers when it comes time to capitalize on it financially. Our engineers and

startups are sought out and bought out by the United States and China. In my district, there's demand for talented individuals, which is a good start, but what's missing are the long-term, system-level connections. Because of this fragmentation, our exchanges are in a precarious position. We need to make an extra effort. What France has to offer Texas has not been clearly defined yet.

Texas hosts artists in residence through the Villa Albertine program, which aims to reinvigorate cultural cooperation between France and the United States. Can you tell us a bit more about this program?

Yes, Villa Albertine is a new, ambitious and exciting initiative that was launched by our Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian, in the summer of 2021. What we are trying to create is nothing short of a 21st century Villa Medici for the United States! Since the U.S. is a country the size of a continent, instead of creating one single residency, the idea is to create a series of residencies spread throughout the country that allow for symbiosis with local artists. The arts scene and the cultural context are completely different in New York, Los Angeles, New Orleans and Texas! Artists in residence create their own project, then the residency adapts to them, rather than the other way around. I have no doubt that this program will give a huge boost to the arts in the United States and France, in addition to the arts scenes in regions where France is a stakeholder or maintains close connections, such as Africa and the Middle East.

For the first edition of Villa Albertine, which is under way right now, each consular district was given a theme. I'm delighted to say that at time when spatial exploration is experiencing a rebirth, Houston was tasked with renewing imagination. How do today's artists influence the way that we imagine space? The astrophysicist Fatoumata Kebe, who is specialized in the study of space debris and is very involved in science education, is a rising figure in the next generation of astronauts. She completed a residency at Marfa, the arts oasis in the Chihuahuan Desert that was created in the 1970s by the New York artist, Donald Judd. France has always been a space power. We have a lot to offer Texas, which is home to all of the biggest players in the field, starting with NASA and SpaceX. Many different players are emerging in this new chapter in space exploration in both the public and private sectors. In Houston, the aerospace ecosystem is booming and diversifying, with research institutes, industrial

groups, startups, citizens and artists all playing their part. Villa Albertine helps to support artists' contributions to this movement.

We haven't talked about French citizens very much yet. What are the services that the Consulate General provides to French expatriates?

Some 13,000 French citizens live in the district, mainly in Texas' biggest cities. In addition, the Consulate General handles passports and social services for the over 1,000 French nationals living in Louisiana. The number one mission of a consular post is to protect our citizens and help them with French administrative procedures. Protecting our citizens is even more important here given the frequency of natural disasters such as hurricanes, tornados and the 2021 cold wave. At the end of August, not long after I arrived in Texas, I had to coordinate the aid that we provided to French nationals during Hurricane Ida, which mainly impacted Louisiana. The Consulate General of Houston provided aid to French citizens and to the consular teams on the ground.

With the Covid-19 pandemic, travel and visa applications have grown far more challenging and in some cases, have come to a halt altogether. Many French citizens have turned to the French diplomatic posts in distress. What influence does the consulate have over these procedures?

As you know, American visas are delivered by the American authorities. In addition to managing health crises, diplomatic posts aim to create a framework for robust, high-level, smooth bilateral relations that will allow us to meet the expectations of French citizens who are trying to come to the United States. Our academic and cultural exchange programs and our business marketing initiatives are all part of these promotional efforts. During the pandemic, borders shut down all around the world, each of them according to different procedures and timelines. I won't rehash this situation, which remains concerning. In circumstances like these, all the diplomatic channels – from the consular district to the embassy and the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs – were used to strengthen dialogue with the American authorities and manage the impact on French citizens as much as possible.

The death penalty is still in effect in the three states in your district and Texas just adopted extremely restrictive abortion legislation. How do you approach these topics with your local partners?

These are very sensitive social issues. When I talk about them with people here, I remind them of the path that France has taken and I talk about the major figures in French history who embodied the advances we've made – Robert Badinter for the death penalty and Simone Veil for abortion. Our history and heritage grant us legitimacy when we talk about these topics in Texas. I try to show them that France too had to go through deep, divisive domestic debates. The path that France has taken has inspired other countries. During the French presidency of the Council of the European Union, Europeans will serve as advocates for the universal abolition of the death penalty. I believe that it is this path and this experience that we should be sharing with our American partners.

Demonstrations in Houston against Texas's Republican governor's proposed abortion restrictions (Photo credit: Houston Public Media)

Do you find that you are also influenced by the people you speak with in Texas and their approach to certain topics?

That is the appeal of being a fly on the wall in a foreign country. You have the chance to understand things, contextualize them and put them into perspective and to analyze a wide range of points of view in all their nuance. This district is a border region and its recent history is still very much on people's minds. They have had to cope with nature's adversity, which had to be tamed and which continues to make its presence known with increasingly frequent and powerful natural disasters. Immigrants remember arriving in a hostile land. Heads of family have had to protect their loved ones. It's important that we learn to think like Americans in order to understand them better and have more productive discussions.

“Learn to think like Americans” – that certainly sums up what it means to be a diplomat!

This job is about creating dialogue and building bridges. That's what I love about it. It's a completely immersive experience, a chapter in your life that lasts between three and five years on average before you move somewhere else. You have to adapt quickly so that you can understand others and they can understand you.

You've lived in China and in the United States. Do you see any parallels between these two countries?

Both countries are the size of continents and both are complex and powerful. Both are hard to read and to comprehend. What I am passionate

about is understanding their different relationships with power: the ways that they manage it, claim it and project it. That is what has always fascinated me. That is why I went to explore China as a university student in 1991, then took a job teaching in California. The strategic issue of their relationships with power has grown more intense over time. Now it is front and center in the news with the rivalry and the confrontation between the United States and China. Coming from France and Europe myself, what drives me is trying to figure out what the future of Europe will be, between the United States and China? What kind of triangulation should we create on the international stage? How can Europe play on the same strategic level as the United States and China?

Do Americans view French people as Europeans?

That's an excellent question and a topical one since France currently holds the Presidency of the Council of the European Union! The first question is, do Europeans in Texas still feel European? In order to create a European community here and instill a sense of belonging, I plan to bring together the European consular community in Texas, which is to say, the consul generals and the honorary consuls of Member States who are here in Houston, Austin and Dallas. Regarding Americans' perception of Europeans, my initial conversations on this topic have stayed with me because most of the questions that people asked me had to do with conflicts among Member States and conflicts with the Commission (as is the case with Hungary) or security issues involving neighboring countries (such as corruption in the Balkans and the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean). But Europe is so much more than a family whose members squabble with each other and with their neighbors. The European continent has all the markings of a world power but people neither see that, nor do they understand it or even admit it. I want to help them see that not only is the European Union a market and most Member States are allies but also that Europeans have a sovereign strategic vision and they have something unique to offer the world. We have our own model and the ability to project it, as the recent digital service company regulations have shown. That is what will be driving France during its EU presidency: “Recovery, Strength, Belonging.” Like President Macron said, “We need to change from a Europe of internal cooperation to a powerful Europe active in the world, fully sovereign, free in its choices and master of its own destiny.”

Regarding the power dynamics between China, the United States and Europe, did the AUKUS crisis have any repercussions in your area?

I received a lot of messages out of the blue expressing sympathy and sometimes even embarrassment. The diplomatic crisis between Washington and Paris didn't have any local repercussions though. The strength of the friendship and the business relationship between Texas and France served as a buffer, as did Texas' characteristic independence from federal politics, without a doubt.

In conclusion, have you kept up your connection with philosophy?

Yes I have, and I am sure that I will keep it up for a long time because that's what grounds me. I brought my books with me here! Philosophy means two things to me. First, it's mental gymnastics. Just like any former gymnast, I enjoy practicing from time to time. As a diplomat, you often find yourself in situations that are hard to read, whether you are in France or abroad. Philosophy gives you tools, precious analytical tools, that help make things easier to read. Philosophy strengthens your ability to think independently and stay grounded when you are faced with something or someone different from yourself. Lastly, it's a form of intellectual stimulation. I like listening to what thinkers trained in philosophy have to say about identity in the age of multiculturalism, freedom of expression in the age of Big Tech, foreign interference in an open world and new areas of conflict at a time when space exploration is experiencing a rebirth as well as the proliferation of hybrid wars, artificial intelligence and transhumanism, among other things. Philosophy helps you to tackle the complex questions posed by today's world.

[1] 36 million inhabitants. *Source: Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for the United States, Regions, States, and Puerto Rico: 2019 (NST-EST2019-01), U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division*