



AMERICAN VERTIGO: BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY WITH TINA BROWN

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(“ON THE ROAD AGAIN” NOT TRANSCRIBED)

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Good evening. My name is Paul Holdengräber, and I’m the Director of Public Programs here at the New York Public Library. And indeed, Bernard-Henri Lévy has been on the road again, and that’s why we’re here tonight. It’s quite wonderful to introduce the season. It’s opening night for us. I’m, as I said, the director of a program called “Live.” And though I’ve been told not to say this, I must. My goal here at the New York Public Library is to make the lions roar. (APPLAUSE)

It’s wonderful to welcome Bernard-Henri Lévy back again. I think some of you might be a little bit suspicious that I’m inviting too many Frenchmen. But there is a French connection here. I have indeed begun my season a year ago, about 450 days ago, the very first person I invited was Dominique de Villepin. And since I wanted to begin on a benign note, I asked him to talk about terrorism. (LAUGHTER) We also had Pascal Bruckner talking about vulgarity. We had Patrice Chéreau. I hope we will have Matthieu Kassovitz and Bernard Kouchner.

It is a great pleasure to welcome the Consul General of France, François Delattre. And “Et à tout nos amis Français de Paris et d’ailleurs bonsoir et bienvenue à la bibliothèque publique de New

York.” “Live” is also of course now on the road again. We begin again a new season now. I stopped for about 45 days, and actually took a vacation in a Blackberry-free zone. And now I’m back, and in a couple of weeks I will have the great pleasure of interviewing one of the best, greatest, most wonderful pianists, Alfred Brendel. I invite you to come and join here that conversation. Shortly thereafter, we’ll have Tony Kushner coming to talk to us with others about Arthur Miller. So, stay tuned. Join our e-mail list, which is growing by three or four hundred people every month. Become part of the heat known as the New York Public Library. Books will become available after the event. They have been signed by Bernard-Henri Lévy. And I also encourage you to join the library, to become a member of the library. It’s one of the last beacons of democracy. (APPLAUSE)

Great many thanks to PEN, the international organization of writers, and particularly to Mike Roberts. And I really would like to say sorry to all the people who couldn’t make it tonight. We did have—I feel sometimes as though I’m running a rock concert series. But then I invite rock stars. So, it’s quite easy. We had to turn away quite a few people. But not without giving them something else in return. About three or four hundred people now who couldn’t come tonight, will be able to go to the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y to hear Bernard-Henri Lévy, or BHL, as he is known, at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y with Adam Gopnik.

Now, on Sunday—thank you, Diane von Fürstenberg. On Sunday, at 7:00 p.m. or 7:30—but please don’t quote me, though I may be quotable. Tonight there will be a conversation between Tina Brown and Bernard-Henri Lévy. I’m often asked how long these conversations last. And I say they should last about as long as a psychoanalytical session. So, in a Lacanian mode, probably fifty minutes, and then it should stop, brutally. But there will also be twenty minutes of Q and A. And I would encourage the public who has questions to ask. And indeed, we have a Frenchman, an English person, and a very—I’m sure, very cosmopolitan group of people here, and even some Americans, to raise (LAUGHTER) some questions to our philosopher, and to Tina Brown, about their journeys taken and not taken. But questions can be asked in about fifty seconds. So, ask questions rather than statements. There are two mics on each side of the beautiful hall in which you are in tonight. Line up, ask questions, and make them provocative.

Tina Brown, former Editor-in-Chief of both *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker*, wrote in her little piece about what she might do tonight, that she will grill France's most provocative thinker, BHL. I remember being on the phone with Bernard—and maybe he doesn't remember this. But he said, "Grill. Is it good or bad?" So I said to him, it depends how you like your meat cooked. À point, bien fait, or saignant, well-done, medium, or rare. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you Tina Brown and BHL, Bernard-Henri Lévy. (APPLAUSE)

**TINA BROWN:** Thank you. So, Paul—I think only Paul would have the kind of mischief to have an English woman talking to a French man about the state of America. I mean, what do we know? It's insane. However, I will at least say that I'm on my way to becoming an American citizen, as long as the FBI says that my library records pass the smell test. But, I'm nearly there.

Now, the other thing that Bernard always says to me is, he doesn't understand a word that I say. Not a word. (LAUGHTER) He says I speak way too fast, in my English accent. To which I can only retort that sometimes his French accent is, shall we say, sometimes charmingly inscrutable. Okay? (LAUGHTER) So, we may have just a little—tough time sometimes here tonight. So I'm hoping that the audience, which I gather is mostly American, will then rush in with some wholly American interventions at question time, as we get completely lost in our own cultural misunderstandings.

So, Bernard. Now, you've been on this wonderful journey, this long journey. Presumably, you came to the project with your own preconceptions about America. What do you bring here? Which major kind of prejudice did you come to when you came here, that has been kind of blown up by this trip?

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** Well, to be clear, first of all, I am fond of America. I like this country. I like it since a long time. I was built and shaped by it, in a way. This is the first reason. The second reason is that there was a commitment given to me by a magazine, an American magazine, *Atlantic Monthly*. And frankly, without them, without Cullen Murphy, to whom, by the way, the book is devoted, I would never have had the boldness and the arrogance of pretending in nine months of time, making the tour of America. It was really his idea. At the

beginning, I resisted. I said no. It feel—it seemed too heavy for me. And I did not feel able to that. Cullen insisted. I had a very great translator for my articles, Charlotte Mandell, who is here. I don't know where.

**TINA BROWN:** You can't kiss up to anybody else.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** I'm sorry?

**TINA BROWN:** You can't do any more kissing up to anybody. (LAUGHTER) Tell us what you really came—with your prejudices. Enough of the log-rolling, as we say.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** No, no, no, no. I tell you, it's very important to have—when you don't, when you handle a language, you have a translator who's a real partner, is very, very important. So, I came for because I love America. I came because I thought that between our two countries—not ours. Ours. There was such a wall of misunderstanding. Such—as you say in Los Angeles, there was a word which is smog. A mix of smoke and fog. Smog. That means, a smog of clichés. A smog of commonplaces. Which really—impeaches us. Prevents us, to see each other. So my desire was to try, as far as I could, to go across that. To try to see America as it is. With its dark sides, and with its bright sides.

**TINA BROWN:** But was there one thing that you were just amazed at how wrong you were about it originally? There was something that you found that was just way different from what you expected?

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** Something which I what?

**TINA BROWN:** Something that you found in your travels that was just not at all what you thought you would find in America?

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** Many things. For example, the jails. The prisons. As you know, it was one of the proposals of Alexis de Tocqueville, when he came here in 1831, it was his

commitment, a study of the penitentiary system. And I tried to commit myself also to this study. And I did not imagine the state of the American jails. There are so many good things in this country. I'm sorry to begin with this one. But it is true that when you go to Rikers Island, near Queens. When you go to the prisons of women in Nevada, near Las Vegas. When you go, of course, to Guantanamo, where I spent a few days, too. And such—and a pretty good, a real piece of time.

When you see that, there is something really disgusting, and more than I thought. I don't know why. It is not the material aspect of the jails. They are not worse than in my country. Jails are always, all over the world, something terrible. But here, maybe it is the shadow. The cloud, the dark cloud of the death penalty, which is *above* all the prisons and penitentiaries of this country. And which really breaks the heart.

**TINA BROWN:** You said in the book that you felt that Guantanamo was, in a way, just an outgrowth of the prisons that you saw. Do you think there is a real strand of some kind of brutality in the American psyche that makes their jails worse, you say, than anything you've seen in France? I mean, I can't believe that French jails are a five-star experience. I mean, they must be—

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** It is not a question of five stars. But for example—one example. You have, in America, in the American jails, or prisons, you have a lot of people, of petty criminals. Petty criminals. Little drug dealers and so on. Whom I am not so sure would be in jail in some European countries.

**TINA BROWN:** What are they doing? I mean, are they robbing tourists instead? I mean, what happens to people of that kind of crime in France?

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** How do you call that, fines? Some fines. Maybe some—two or three days of jail, something like that. You have, sometimes, a feeling. In Rikers Island, it is clear. In Angola it is clear, too. You have sometimes a feeling that this state, which is—America, again, is a great country. I think that democracy really has a great vitality, here in this country.

But as you know, there is a weakness of the power. Of the federal power. You saw that in Katrina, for example. And sometimes you have the feeling that the treatment of the social question becomes a treatment by your penal system. Social question, being transformed into a penal question. You have a problem, for example, with poverty. You have a problem with addiction to drugs. Okay, jails. That's why this is one of the countries in the democratic world where you have the biggest proportion of prisoners.

So all this, for me, this was a surprise. The state of the jails in this country. The jail of Angola, for example. Near New Orleans, at the end of the world, I would say, of Louisiana. Which has two peculiarities. Number one, it only admits people, men who have a very long-term penalty. Lifelong, or death penalty. And number two, because of the law of Louisiana, there is no parole. Which means that there is no way to get out of there. If they are condemned to a death penalty. If they are condemned to lifelong penalty, they will spend all their lives there. They will only go out in a coffin.

This sort of absence, absolute, of hope. Total absence of perspective, again. And in this place, which is Angola, which is on the other side, a sort of prairie. A sort of very peaceful green place, with animals, horses, and so on. This is something very heartbreaking and very similar to a piece of theatre of Jean-Paul Sartre, depicting the hell. It may be an image of that.

**TINA BROWN:** Now, as you set out on this journey, it was the election year that you set out. And of course immediately after the election, there was a tremendous amount of discussion about red-state, blue-state America. And how the blue states don't understand the red states, and so on. Did you feel yourself, that this cliché of the red state, blue state is an accurate depiction? And that indeed, blue states and red states, there is no point of understanding? Did you sense that as you traveled?

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** Yes, of course. But I don't know if it is the real—if the real line between the political forces—I'm not sure that, if this is the best way to describe it. I think that there is, for example, what I felt after my encounters with these or those, after having met so many people. I feel, for example, that the partitions in foreign policy are more important than

these ones. I feel that some of the religious oppositions in this country count more. And are more decisive, than this blue and red opposition. I'm not sure that you can—the Republican and Democratic opposition, the blue and red opposition, might be the worst way of describing, of depicting, the reality of the strong debate which is going on in this country.

Because what surprised me more—I thought, from abroad, America has the image of a country where there is no ideology. Pragmatic country, no ideas. Commerce, market, and so on and so on. And what surprised me, was the contrary. The intensity, vitality, right or wrong. Whatever be your position. Of the political debate going on here.

**TINA BROWN:** Well of course, you arrived at a time when the political debate had never been more intense than at that election time.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** Exactly, yeah.

**TINA BROWN:** And during your travels—I mean, you spent quite a lot of time with the so-called Neo-Con intellectuals. Frankly, I thought you were way too nice to Bill Kristol but that's beside the point. And you feel, I think, don't you, that all the intellectual energy is on the right right now, and not on the left. How can that be, really, when the major idea of the right in the last few years has been the invasion of Iraq, which you feel is a bankrupt idea? So why are you so admiring of the intellectual energy of the right?

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** I don't admire it, not at all. And I don't think that I—I would not say that I admire Bill Kristol at all.

**TINA BROWN:** Now he tells me.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** No, what I say—what I say. I try, coming from abroad, and trying to have a fresh and honest look at all that, I did not want to describe America as black and white. We are black and white, you and me today. But not America. We are English and French. So I try to be honest.

When you see this phenomenon of neoconservatives, you have to separate two things, in my opinion. On one side, there is the idea of spreading democracy all over the world. The idea that Milošević, or Saddam Hussein, or Mullah Omar, are real enemies and have to be dethrown, overthrown. This is not bad. A Democrat, somebody who is in favor of the right of intervention, cannot be against that. This part of their thought, you cannot honestly say that it is bad. And I would even say—this is what I say in the book—that I prefer a man who thinks that democracy is good for all over the world. That there are not some countries who are worth democracy, and others which are unworth democracy. I prefer that to some old Jacksonian, or Jeffersonian, politician who think that democracy is good for America. America has to close its borders, and never mind what happens to the rest of the world. Prefer that.

Now, the problem begins when you see how they implement this bright idea, that democracy is okay for all over the world. The—for example, I think that the big problem of these guys is to think that democracy, you produce it all over, at a glance. It is not like that. Democracy is a task. Painful, very long. Has to be prepared. It is not just—they transform their old messianism of their fathers. Bill Kristol and so on. You know, democratic messianism. It is a mistake.

Second big mistake? They pretend to be Wilsonians. They are not Wilsonians. Woodrow Wilson, President of America at the time of the first—the beginning of the century, after the First World War. He built the League of Nations. He was a true multilateralist. They cannot pretend to be Wilsonian. They are just a bullish American, thinking that they can go to war alone, and so on. And third, the big trouble for me with these guys is that, as I said to Kristol a few days ago. I told him, I don't understand when you—when I go to a restaurant. When I go to a restaurant, if I went to the restaurant with George Bush—God does not but . . . (LAUGHTER).

**TINA BROWN:** I can't see him coming.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** I would take—I would take a first course. I would take a second course. Maybe I would take a dessert, and so on. You, Kristol, you take the whole menu. You take the foreign policy. You take—



**TINA BROWN:** And meanwhile, he's gone to bed, anyway.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** Of course. Of course. And you take the abortion, the anti-abortion movement. You take the moral values. You take the death penalty. He even takes the creationism crookedness. So, this is a problem. So if you want to be honest, you have to stress on the two points. It departs from an idea which is not infamous. Defend democracy. We cannot be against that, is my feeling. And it goes to a policy which is absolutely disgusting.

**TINA BROWN:** Now, which Democrats—I mean, was there anybody on the left that you met that you didn't feel was bankrupt of ideas, but had a real—something to say for America? Who did you meet on the Democratic side that impressed you?

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** I met, thanks to Tina Brown, a great woman called Hillary Clinton. That's true, must be said. Hillary Clinton is not the worst candidate and politician you have in this city, and in this country.

**TINA BROWN:** But tell me, now, you traveled, though, through America now. And you've interviewed so many people—you know, in the middle of the country, and the red states and so on. Did you feel the people that you met on these travels—would they accept Hillary Clinton as President? Would she be able to win these people?

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** I don't know. I think that the day she will really run for office, there will be—I can foresee, there is a piece in the book, a chapter in the book where I remember that I was in another life, a novelist. And I try to imagine the political climate, when she will really run for office, and when the American people, and especially the big Republican mommies and dedicated dads, will discover that this woman will enter into the very Oval Office where was committed the hugest crime against humanity we ever saw, which is the blow job of Bill—Bill Kristol. Of Bill Clinton. Bill Kristol might need one also. But, Bill Clinton. I think that this moment, which is—

**TINA BROWN:** We got to blow jobs very fast. I had that—you know.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** Which is hard. I try to compete, Tina. I try to compete. This moment, which is hard to imagine—I think that you will have a real psychodrama at this moment. And then there will be a moment where political programs, great ideology, and that sort—but I joke, but it is serious, and it is sad. I feel that being considered the huge Puritanism which runs in this country, the huge hatred which exists against this couple. Bill and Hillary Clinton. Considering also the antifeminist feeling which remains in some parts of the depths of the country. You will have all these things which will come up. And this, we cannot imagine the effect of it.

Fortunately, there is not only Hillary Clinton. I finish my answer to your question. There are other great guys. There is one man who really impressed me a lot. And more than impressed me. I was fascinated by the charisma of the guy, by the ideas he defends. And by the way in which he defends them. His name is Barack Obama. And I was impressed, why? Because of course, he's sort of African American. But he's an African American who, for the first time, does not play on guiltiness. He does not say to America, "You are eternally—you are guilty a little. And in fact, you are guilty for what happened, and so on." But he plays it in another way. Maybe because his father is not the inheritor, the descendant of a slave of Louisiana, but a man of Africa. Maybe because he got the thing. He plays on seduction, on positiveness, more than on guiltiness, and accusations. So that's why I think that he could have—and I spoke with many people about him in deep America. I think he could have a chance.

**TINA BROWN:** He could cross over. I like what you said in the book, about how he is the first black American candidate of any kind who has been the promise rather than the reproach. I think that's a really good way to put it.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** Wow. You say it better than me. But it is in the book.  
(LAUGHTER)

**TINA BROWN:** But you, now, how does Barack Obama stay authentic?

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** How does he stay?

**TINA BROWN:** Authentic. How does he stay authentic? I mean, he is—I agree, it was the only authentic moment in the Democratic Convention was when he spoke. It was a *real* moment. It suddenly felt, the hairs on the back of your neck stood up and you felt, “This is real. This is something happening here.” But in the culture that we live in, political culture and media culture of endless sound bites and spin and fakeness and handlers and consultants, and so on—is it possible for a real authentic man—you know, a real talent like that. Is he gonna have to change too much, to really be able to get through?

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** If he does not hire Bob Schrum, he might. (LAUGHTER) He might remain authentic. He might. No, the problem—you know, I met some of these—no, they did a good job, of course.

**TINA BROWN:** No, they didn’t. They did a terrible job.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** They took Kerry ’til 48 percent. But. I met so many of them. And what—the trip with these guys, I was so surprised. I went to them, I had plenty of interviews and so on. And I asked them, “What are your ideas? What is your program in order to win the battle of ideas?” They always, invariably answered me, “To make good fundraising.”

**TINA BROWN:** Yeah. Yeah.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** “To win the battle of money.” I said, okay, got it. But to have—to get money for what? “To get even more money, and to get even more fundraising.” There is something that doesn’t work.

**TINA BROWN:** No, no, it’s the worst thing.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** This is one of the problems of the left. Really.

**TINA BROWN:** Yes, yeah. Well, it's the problem probably of the right as well, but it is the problem of the political process here.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** No—no. Because on the right, you have the neoconservatives. Which, you can think whatever you want about them. But Wolfowitz, for instance. You may hate or love. But he's a man who tried to make politics out of ideas.

**TINA BROWN:** You have to say that, yeah.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** It is a fact.

**TINA BROWN:** Yeah. Now, Bill Clinton. (LAUGHTER)

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** It is a fact.

**TINA BROWN:** Let's get back to Bill Clinton again. There's a very good, I think, description in the book of the sad day at the Clinton Library, in Arkansas, when you described the sadness of it all. The rain, the terrible rain that day. And the gloating Bush crowd, and pallid President Clinton, who'd just recently had a heart attack. And you felt that it was a real end, you know, of that whole sort of mystique. Do you feel that Clinton's legacy is going to be dismal? Or do you think that he will have a legacy?

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** No, I think he will have a legacy, of course. I think Clinton was—the Clinton era belongs to this great tradition of great America. I think really so, even if he did mistakes. Even if he did not succeed in a few, and one, especially, of his great projects. There was a soul. There was a project. There was a movement in that, which will be a legacy.

This day, it was terrible, of course. For all of the reasons you said. And also, there was such a terrible—there were two terrible scenes. First of all, it was just after the Democratic defeat. And the Democrats were like ghosts. You know? At the end of *A la recherche de temps perdu* of

Marcel Proust, you have “Le Balle de Guermantes.” The Ball of the Guermantes. All the heroes of *la recherche*, of the *recherche* of the Lost Time, coming back. But thirty years after, completely decayed, like phantoms and ghosts of themselves. This was the Clinton Inauguration of the Library. All the Democratic guests—not all of them. There are a few here who were vivid and young. But, except those. Except those. Really, it was a ball of ghosts.

This was one thing. Because of the defeat. Because of the defeat. Defeat is a terrible enemy for politicians. And second, the only thing which was not foreseen, when Bill Clinton planned its inauguration—he planned it the very day he entered in office, as you know. The very day, with this madness about memory and museums you have in America. The very night a President takes on in office, he decides which day will be the inauguration of the library in a few years. Which was not foreseen is that there will be the presence of all of the current presidents. The President running in office, and the past Presidents. And what was not, which was not foreseen, is that Gerald Ford would be ill this day. Another one will be absent. That George W. Bush Junior will be the current President. So, it was the right of President Clinton. That the former President, W—not W. George Not-W Bush would be on the left side. The two wives were on the two sides, too. They believe in God, so they thought that the sky was with them. The bad weather voted Republican.

And you had the poor Clinton, pallid, taking the hand of his wife, like this. It was charming, by the way. And the four Bushes, with very strong coats. A sort of arrogant smile. God is blessing Republican Ex and Present Presidents. It was a nightmare. (LAUGHTER)

**TINA BROWN:** That’s true.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** But America.

**TINA BROWN:** But you’re so right. Because in fact—I mean, Al Gore said to me that he was standing near Barbara Bush, and she went—said to him, “Somebody up there doesn’t like him.”

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** Exactly. Exactly.

**TINA BROWN:** Which was a charmingly . . . graceful . . . response. Now, can we just talk about sex for a bit? Let's just get back to sex here, since you raised it. You know, one of the major differences between—you know, France and America, is frankly their attitudes to sexuality. It's—every time there is any kind of scandal in America involving sex, we read some lofty piece saying, “Well, of course, in France, everybody's laughing up their sleeve, because this is not the way things are done in France. Everybody has a mistress in public life. It's completely taken for granted. And America is just this bourgeois, totally puritanical culture. It's a ridiculous state of affairs.” I mean, is this an unbridgeable divide? I mean, is this a real huge difference? Or really, in public life, in France now, is that an old-fashioned concept? I mean, can major politicians truly have mistresses and behave sexually any way they like, and it doesn't impact on them?

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** I don't think it is a real difference. Number one, you have a lot of French men who have not mistress. Who are in love.

**TINA BROWN:** Are you sure?

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** Who are in love with their wife. And without a mistress. Number two, you have a lot of American men, even in politics, who have mistresses. And a lot of them. The difference—the difference is that in France, as far as today is concerned, 'til today, in France there is something which is the right of privacy. The right of secrecy. The idea that if a President wants to have an inappropriate behavior in his office, it is his problem. It does not regard the nation.

In France, this is the point. It is not that we have more mistresses, and that you have less. And that when one President has one it is a nightmare. No! The point is that we have—there was a long battle, during decades in France, for the right of secrecy. And in America, what happened with Clinton, for me, was really more than disgusting. It was absurd. It was all the politics of the biggest power in the world, suspended to that. It was terrible.

And what is even more terrible for me—and this I didn't know. So in *American Vertigo*, it was really a bad surprise. One day, I was in Berkeley. And I met some people whom I admired from far, a lot. Who did, and who were doing, quite a great job against the war in Iraq. And in favor of the enlistment of citizens, for the citizens for the next election. The people of MoveOn.

**TINA BROWN:** MoveOn.org.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** MoveOn.org. Great organization. Inheritors of the radical movements of the '60s. In a way, *my* political culture. I was so pleased and honored to meet them. And we discussed, and I asked them, "But what does MoveOn mean, exactly?" And the people, the woman who talked with me said, "Yes, we took birth at the moment of the Lewinsky-Clinton affair. And our complete slogan was, 'Censure the President and Move On to a Real Problem.'" Censure, I don't know if it's exact—yeah.

**TINA BROWN:** Yeah. Censure.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** Censure the President, and move on to real problems. Except we would say, "Censure the President for what?" She told me, "Because he did—he made a fault. This inappropriate behavior is not allowed. Is very bad." I said, "You really believe that it is a crime who should, which should be censured?" She told me, "Not to the point of an impeachment, of course. Not to the point of this huge scandal. But that this should be condemned, yes." So, I discovered that even in this wing of the political spectrum. Even in this part, which is the most noble on my point, there is some remnants of Puritanism, and some prejudice of the same kind. And this, for me, was really a bad surprise.

**TINA BROWN:** Well, this is what you said about your time in America, recently in *New York* magazine. "Some time in your private life you have a mistress you love. You spend some time in a grand hotel with good room service and great champagne, and you separate. And when you're really in love you think, 'Can I wake up with her every morning?' That's exactly what I did with America. America was a great mistress. I had a great BLEEP with America. And it was like a weekend in the Hôtel Du Cap." So. It was good for you, but was it good for us? (LAUGHTER)

That's the point. I mean, why should, at the end of your sort of whole travel through America—I mean, what should we take away from your book? I mean, what does it do for us, to have you, as a Frenchman, come here and tell us stuff about America? Where do you get off, as they say?  
(LAUGHTER)

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** First of all, for me, I—I got something marvelous in this travel, and in this book. Which is to discover, really, a country which I thought I knew, and which I did not know. And this, for me, this is what I meant by this metaphor, which has not been accurately—

**TINA BROWN:** It's a hostage to fortune, I can tell you.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** —quoted. There was something like that. A relationship with a country which I knew from time to time, in very special circumstances. To see it, really, in his dark and bright side. I said at the beginning, as I said at the beginning. Was something great.

What you can, America, draw from this book, I don't know. Maybe nothing. Maybe something. Maybe a mirror. I don't know, maybe a fresh eye who sees in a different way, things you yourself know or want—prefer not to know. I don't—I ignore that. What I can say, the conclusion of this book, the general spirit of this book, is the following. I think that you have, in America, the roots of the best democracy in the world. I think that really, this democracy, when you go deep inside the country, is still living. Is still vivid. Is still youthful. I really believe that. Even in the red states. Even in the red states, my dear Tina. Even there.

**TINA BROWN:** I believe you.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** And I think that you have—this is an accident of history. You have a hijacking. A hijacking, like for planes. You have a hijacking of a great democratic tradition by a group of people who are sometimes dishonoring it. This is my conclusion, and this is the situation. (APPLAUSE)



**TINA BROWN:** Thank you. Thank you very much, Bernard. I'd now like to invite you Americans out there to come and give your take on what you think about Bernard's book, and ask any question you like. Is there anyone who'd like to come up and ask something? Can you see? Over there? Identify yourself, please.

**QUESTION:** I'd like to ask a question.

**TINA BROWN:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** You started off tonight saying that you wrote this book because you felt there was a smog between the Americans and the French people. What misconceptions would you like to clear up for the French people about Americans, by writing this book?

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** The book is not addressed first to the French people. I really addressed it with more—all of my, all the humility I—I can, to an American audience. It is a book, that's why it is published in America first. It is really addressed to an American audience. But I don't—I will answer to your question. There are a few clichés which I think I can contribute, in my country, to—not to destroy, but to diminish. For example, the idea that America is a fundamentalist country.

There is this idea in Europe that, even to the extent that bin Laden and the neo-Christian is the same. Which is whatever you can think about the fundamentalists, which is absolutely absurd. I think this cliché is weakened by a few of the pages of this book. Another example, I think that there is a concept which is used by American and by European, to describe, to depict that the American policy and the—sometimes the crimes of America, which is the concept of empire. It is absolutely admitted all over the world that America is an empire. That America is the new Rome. That America is the new Roman empire. This paradigm of Rome is a general paradigm, which helps, and who allows to understand the policy of America. I think it is not a good paradigm. And I show why. I think that it is a paradigm who prevents us and maybe you to see the reality of the foreign policy of America. Its good aspects, its bad aspects, and so on. Another cliché.

And many more. For example, a little cliché. I—in France, we are convinced that America is a country full of obese. That America is *the* country in the world of obese. I looked. Obese. My first surprise is that I did not find so many more obese in America than in France.

**TINA BROWN:** He means fat people, everybody.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** I'm sorry?

**TINA BROWN:** So, you mean fat people, right?

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** I met—I met normal people, but I met also—I met also—I discovered that there is a double industry. A double lobby in this country. The lobby of the junk food, and the lobby of fitness. Who are taking care of your bodies. Who are conforming every American body into a sort of laboratory, or field of experience. And which are convincing a lot of people that they are obese, and they are not.

**TINA BROWN:** Well, they are, actually.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** These are—another cliché.

**TINA BROWN:** And now the French are getting fatter.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** And so many like that.

**TINA BROWN:** All right. Who else? Back there?

**QUESTION:** What was your position on the Iraq war, in the beginning along the line of Bernard Kouchner and some others, who were for it two years ago? What was your position then?

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** I am—in general, I have been, nearly all my life, on the position of Bernard Kouchner, for example. Who is, for me, one of the great guys, and great politicians now we have in France. I was behind him when he conceptualized, when he invented le droit d'ingérence . The right and the duty to intervene in a situation of genocide, for example. Or in a country where you have a state who thinks he has the right to dispose of his people as he wants.

We were on the same side in Bosnia. We were on the same side in Rwanda. And in other circumstances. In this issue, it is a first time we disagree. I thought that this war—this war in Iraq was a terrible mistake. Number one, because it was based about a lie. And I think that you cannot, even if you are a Leo Straussian, you cannot build a policy on such important matters, on a lie. And by the way, I wonder. I remember a President of America who was impeached because he lied. I remember of another President of America who was nearly impeached. There was a program to impeach him, because of a very small lie. We spoke of it before. I don't understand why this President, who committed such a lie. We know now, (APPLAUSE) that the question of the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq was a lie. All evidence is there to know that those who pretended it, did not believe in it. It was an official lie. In the old Machiavelli, or the think—Straussian tradition. Why is there not, in this country, except the cover story of *The Nation* last week. But so late. Why is there not a huge movement of democratic forces, led by consciousness of this country, (APPLAUSE) to ask—at least to raise the question of the impeachment of George Bush. (APPLAUSE) But maybe minor—more minor lies are required. I don't know. I read the other day in an American newspaper, a quote which made me laugh so much, and which is, for me, the—one of the signs that the American press is not such in bad shape. I read, “Would somebody sacrifice herself or himself, in order to give to President Bush a good blow job, so that he could be maybe impeached?” (APPLAUSE) As we say in France, it is not a gift, I think. (LAUGHTER) I don't believe it is a gift.

So number one. This war was a mistake, because you cannot build a policy on a lie. Number two, it was a mistake because it was supposed to create—when you have an enemy—and I think that Islamist, terror, is an enemy. I think it is a fascism. I think it is a fascism. And I think that you—we—should not underestimate the danger of that. But when you have to face an enemy, you have

to do it the right way. You have to do it in a way which will weaken him, and not reinforce him. The enemy.

The result of the war in Iraq, as you all know, has been not to weaken, but to reinforce the enemy, which is Islamic terror, anti-Americanism, all over the world, and clash of civilization. The famous clash of civilization. Which is the common program of an American scholar, which we know. Samuel Huntington. And big world gangster called bin Laden. The clash of civilization, which is the common program of the two, has never been such in good shape as today, after the war in Iraq. So, this is bad politics. And the main reproach we can do to these people who shaped and who mastered this war in Iraq, is to have been very naïve. Very childish. Very bad politicians. Politics. Bad politics.

**TINA BROWN:** Who is the—anyone else here who has a question? Over there?

**QUESTION:** Yes, I was wondering if you could—

**TINA BROWN:** Could you speak up and come to the microphone?

**QUESTION:** There are people at the microphone.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** There are people already on the mic.

**TINA BROWN:** I'm so sorry, I couldn't see you through this light. It's in my eyes. I'm sorry. Yes, I'm sorry.

**QUESTION:** I have a question. So, I was very sad to hear you struggle to find some examples of sort of left-leaning progressive people in America that you admire. You could only come up with two names. You know, Hillary and Obama, I think it was. So, as an African American whose father unfortunately did not come from Africa immediately, but who came from this country and is a descendant of slaves, etc. etc.—but whose parents, for some reason, decided to give me the middle name LaFrance, I'm tempted to move to your country. Move to France. So

tell me. If you could choose, given what you described about the American prisons—if you could choose between being a black person living in the US, and a black person living in France, keeping in mind the recent riots in France, the young people, etc. Where would you choose to live, and why? That's my question. (APPLAUSE)

**TINA BROWN:** That's good. Good question.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** I would prefer to live in America. I would prefer. I would have hated to live in America forty years ago, where the situation of the black people was disgusting. Was unworthy of a democracy. But America, this is the good side of the story. America had made such—since the Sixties, has made such progress. Such mental and moral and political reform, that I think that today, it might be better, more easy to breathe, for a black man or a black woman in America, as in France.

My great surprise, because I had some good surprises also. And many good surprises in this journey. When I was in the southern states, in Alabama, in Tennessee, in all these states. I had in mind the cliché of the old south, racist, *machiste*. With drunk, semi-crazy songs of priests. Rapers. And Ku Klux Klan, and so on and so on.

**TINA BROWN:** And it wouldn't be hard to find it better than that, Bernard. (LAUGHTER)

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** It is a cliché we have through literature also, and through media. And I felt something so different. With still racist, but on the defense. On the defensive. Not daring any more to assert, and to afford their own racism. The relationship of force, the arm-wrestling, has changed. Today in Alabama, to be a racist is more uneasy to say. An example, for instance. We have laughed a lot in Europe about what has been called here in America the famous PC. Political correctness. This movement of the Sixties, of the Seventies. Trying to hunt in the very body of the language, in the very words, all the stains. All the traces. All the remnants of the old story of humiliation and oppression. And we have laughed a lot, the big spirits of France, inspired by Americans like Allan Bloom said, how ridiculous is that. These minority

leaders are turning into Red Guards. They are transforming the campus of the universities in campus of concentration, and so on and so on.

When I traveled in Alabama and in Tennessee, I must confess that my conclusion is that this movement of political correctness has been one with, of course, excesses. True. With, of course, exaggeration. But, has been one of the good things of the politics of the last forty years. The fact of being less easy to have an anti-black joke. The fact of being less easy to have bad words towards a Jew or a gay, or a woman. I feel it as a progress which has been achieved by the democratic consciousness of America. So you have Bush, of course. But you have also that. (LAUGHTER) You have Bush, and you have the American people, if I dare say.

**TINA BROWN:** Let's go to the next—we must talk to some of these other questioners here. Yes, over there. Would you like to say who you are?

**QUESTION:** Yeah. I have a question that pertains to the riots in the banlieues in Paris. And I guess I was going to ask for some differences between an American ghetto and the banlieue in French cities. But after the last question, maybe I can say, where would you prefer to be? In a banlieue outside of Paris, or in an American ghetto maybe in bad neighborhoods of Los Angeles or New York.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** It is a game of the twenty questions you are doing to me. We are at two. Eighteen more left. It's hard to answer, frankly. But I think that because of the lack of federal policy in America. Because of this strange tendency to believe that poverty—because this is—at the end of the day, this is the problem. Poverty is the problem of the people themselves. Might be the problem of the churches. Might be the problem of the neighborhood people. With this, I think it is really not a good thing to live in a ghetto of Los Angeles or of Boston or, still today, of New York.

The poverty in America, you have officially 37,000 of poors. Maybe the real unbearable situations are less than that. But even if it is half of it, this is really something which we don't have in France. You have in L.A., at a view one mile maybe, or two miles from Hollywood, from

the most glamorous houses, and the billionaires and so on, you have a sort of Rwanda. A sort of deep Africa. I mean, the most poor areas of Africa. At home, in America. And this is, again, unworthy of a real democracy. And of the great democracy which America is. From the pilgrim father, to Bill Clinton.

On the other side—wait a minute. On the other side, on the other side, I think that the dialectic—the building of a citizen in America. The way in which, coming from a certain origin, you become in America an American. And a good American patriot works better than ours. We have two rival models, and pattern of citizenship. American one, French one. The main difference between the two, in my opinion, it is one of the conclusions of this part of my book. The main difference is that, roughly speaking, in France, as I said yesterday in the consul, we are Catholic. Which means, Catholic means the world of St. Paul—ni Jews, ni Greques. No Jews, no Greeks, only Catholics. No blacks, no Arabs. Only French immediately. You enter in French. At the very moment you forget your origins, and you become a complete French.

This worked. Don't work any longer. In America, there is a more pragmatic, a more subtle articulation between the origin and the result. Between the double allegiance, the double belongness. Between being an Arab, for example. I saw that in Dearborn. And being an American, which works better. In this sense, I think that America—not the ghettos, of course. But the situation of the minorities might be better today than it is in France.

**TINA BROWN:** Thank you. Okay, over here.

**QUESTION:** I greatly enjoyed reading your series in *The Atlantic* as it came out. But I remember one sort of minor controversy. You had visited Rikers Island, and the Commissioner of New York Prisons, I believe, or the corrections commissioner had said you didn't see some of the things you described. How would you respond to that? Do you know what happened there? A misunderstanding? Do you believe he's wrong?

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** So, in *The Atlantic Monthly*, the issue after, I answered him. There was one point, I will not quote it here because you will think that I am obsessed. There was one point which was denied by the director of the jail. I—

**TINA BROWN:** Of something obscene that you witnessed when you were there, right?

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** Something obscene. Which me and the filming crew which was with me observed and captured in the camera. And I just let it know to the honorable director of Rikers Island.

**TINA BROWN:** Back over here, this one.

**QUESTION:** I work for IBL News newspaper. I'd like to know, Mr. Lévy—you told us before that you addressed this book to an American audience, an American public. I have three questions about this. First of all, what would you think if an American right think tank or an American philosopher, like, for example, Mr. Wolfowitz, writing a book about the suburbs' problems in France, and the problems with the multicultural system, model in France right now. How do you think that the French people and public readers would take this book, if an American told them how to do politics in France? And how do you think that American readers are gonna take this book, in a very critical way somehow?

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** I cannot tell you how France will take it. I am not France. Unfortunately or fortunately, I'm not France. I cannot tell you how they will take it. I can tell you that I would take it like a blessing, if it came from a friend of France. If it came from a writer who is not directed, who is not governed by odd feelings toward my country. And I will answer you, to be concrete. Because don't let us stay in generality. That there is one case which is very famous in my country. We have in France, one real big huge hole of memory. We have a real big black hole in our history. Which we did not want, during years and years, to hear about. There was a wall of smog also, but inside our country, which was there to prevent us to look there, in this other room. In this cupboard. This reality was the Vichy regime. The Vichy regime.



There was a sort of consensus to say that Vichy was a misunderstanding. There was not really such a thing as a Vichy. We had been occupied. Only bad Germans had obliged us to submit ourselves. But not for so long. And we liberated ourselves by huge uprising of the entire population. An American came. One American academic. With, I think, loving feelings to this country. But a love also of truth. His name is Robert Paxton. And he opened a real bridge, which was felt by all of us. The most honest of us were French. As a site of relief. As the best news. We breathed better after the book of Paxton than before. And we felt more comfortable with our own ghosts and demons, after him. And it was an American. And it was a blessing. (APPLAUSE)

**QUESTION:** Monsieur, thank you for writing this book and for being here tonight. I am not an American. I am a New Yorker. (LAUGHTER) No, I'm really not American. But as a citizen of the world, I would like to see if you embrace this book as something that countries that have found a big precipice and hatred for America—that these countries could—in Germany or Italy, this book could be read. And maybe people there could find the love and the good things that you find in America. Because in a world that we have nowadays, it is very important that America does not build a wall, and a precipice, around themselves. And surround themselves by hatred. Which is something that this administration has been succeeding very well in doing. And that in—for future generations, will be very difficult to bridge. Do you think your book can help in this? And is there a plan to publish it as fast as possible, in languages throughout Europe?

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** You know, I am not so confident in such a power of books. Even when they go well, and so on. I'm not so—so confident, in general. Especially when a book has to deal with such a world phenomenon as the—what is called the anti-Americanism. Anti-Americanism in France, in Europe, all over the world, is more than a vague feeling. Is more than a set of ideas. Is something like a deep, strange, mysterious, quasi-religious, passion. This is anti-Americanism.

And its strength struck me so many times, not only in France. In France, of course, I said it many times. It belonged to the history of our extreme right, of our fascist rationale. But away from France. In Pakistan, in Afghanistan, it is, as an ideology as a whole. So a book, no book will do so much against that. But what I think is not the book of these or those—but I think that the

American people itself. The American administration one day might have something to do for that. Might have something to do, even if it is such a strong passion. Might have something to do, to give another image of America.

On one side, of course I think that it is nearly unpracticable, that the depths of anti-Americanism is so huge that little can be done. But let's dream. One minute let's have a dream. As a great American said once, a great Christian American. Which means that Christianity is not—has not always the ugly face that it can have sometimes today. Let's have a dream. Let's imagine that the foreign policy of America goes also, prevents the Rwanda genocide in '94. Prevents, tries to prevent the current possible genocide in Burundi, the twin states of Rwanda. Let's have the dream that the journey of Colin Powell in South Sudan a few years ago, two years ago, would not be a journey without tomorrow. Would not be just a one-shot. But would be the beginning of a real policy to stop the murderers, and to stop an absolutely horrible war.

Let's imagine, let's dream of an America really defending all over the world the values of democracy and of freedom. Not only when it is a weak state like Afghanistan. Not only when he can have some interest to do it. Oil or something else, like in Iraq. But also when there is no objective reason to act like that. Also where there is not committed, vested, immediate interest. Let's imagine that. A superpower who would really act as a superpower, but for democracy. And not with war, but defending human rights. In governing, in the cultural war which takes place all over the world today, between the two Islams. The democracy Islam, and the fundamentalist Islam. Helping the democrats against the fundamentalists. Helping the women of Algeria, the women of Pakistan who was burned alive because they have looked at a man who is not their husband. Let's imagine a democracy which, with peaceful means, would help and intervene in this huge battle. I think that the image of America could be different. Much more than by any book. (APPLAUSE)

(OVERTALK)

**QUESTION:** Thank you so much.

**TINA BROWN:** I would like to take a lot more questions, but I feel—thank you. I’m sorry. Was that another one? No. I’d love to take some more questions, but I think our time is up. And—

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** You think we take one more?

**TINA BROWN:** One more question? All right. One more. One more.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** Yes. There was one there.

**QUESTION:** When de Tocqueville was here, more than 150 years ago, he came back with certain very interesting observations. Like the power of voluntary associations among Americans. The power of faith that isn’t geared to a governmental supervision. If you were in Paris now, and your friends were asking you, “Well, what do you take from your trip from America that you think might be useful here,” what would you tell them?

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** I’m sorry, can you repeat the question? I am a poor Frenchman, with a difficulty to understand sometimes.

**QUESTION:** Okay, I’ll try to be slow.

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** Not to hear! I hear well, in spite of my age. But, understand.

**QUESTION:** Sure. If you were in Paris now, and your friends were asking you, “What did you learn in your time in America that you think is useful here in France?” What would you say?

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY:** I would say one thing for example. Which for me was so important, and warm for my heart. I would say that despite, again, the cliché. Despite the widespread idea that America, which was widespread by medias, by politicians and so on, that America is a country which is at odds with France. Which hates French. All the story of French fries, wine of Bernard put under—Moët & Chandon in the street and so on—I have discovered that this is completely bullshit. (LAUGHTER) I—no, really. I met, during this trip—it took me a

big amount of time. I was there from Rikers Island to Guantanamo. Which was the end of the journey. I did spend here nine or ten months.

I met, during this trip, during this journey, hundreds of people, maybe more. And not only Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. Average people. Plain American men and women. People what left me, who leave me a memory, a souvenir maybe sometimes stronger than the souvenir of those big names we quoted before. I remember, for example, this lady, Ashcraft. The mother of a young sergeant, dead in Iraq, a few months after the beginning of the war. Because he was on the patrol at 3:00 in the morning, in a car which was not well-armored. In an absurd mission for an absurd war. And I met her during hours. And I could not find any words of solace, of consolation. And this woman taught me so much about dignity, courage, and optimism in spite of that. So, I met a lot of peoples like that. A lot of great people.

And the thing which impressed me is that, despite the cliché of American Francophobia, I never met one of them—one man or woman—who looked down to me, in a dismissive way, because I was French. I never found the slightest trace of this famous Francophobia. In Washington D.C., yes. (LAUGHTER) In the headquarters of Bush, and of Kerry. And of Kerry. They did not want to give me an interview with Kerry. I was like a suitcase during two days in a plane going all over the country. I was the only journalist forbidden to get an interview because I was French. It was three days before the polls, before the elections, and they were afraid that speaking with a French could cost him the victory.

So in the headquarters of this guy, there was a lot of people who believed that America was a Francophobic country. The only point is that they don't know their own country. They don't know it well. At least on this point, and also on many other points. This is a thing I will say to the French audience of this book, when it will be published. That the peoples of France and of America are still the same allies. That there is still a community of values. That we still fight for the same moral values. Despite the dispute in a sandbox of our—sometimes, sometimes—of our leaders. Thank you. (APPLAUSE)

**TINA BROWN:** Thank you so much, Bernard. And thank you all so much for coming and listening. I'm very sorry we couldn't have everybody's question heard tonight. But I think we could go on for another hour. So many of the questions you asked, you will find answered in this wonderful book, which I do urge you to read. It's enormously entertaining, very provocative, and gives you food for thought for the next—the rest of the year. So please read it, enjoy it, and thank you so much everyone for joining us. (APPLAUSE).  
("ON THE ROAD AGAIN" NOT TRANSCRIBED)

### END ###