

French ambassador calls Iraq success crucial



PATRICK COLLARD / Staff

All in the past: French Ambassador Jean-David Levitte said France has put its differences with the United States over the war in Iraq behind them.

Jean-David Levitte says whole region, not just U.S. and Iraqis, stand to suffer

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The French ambassador to the United States said Monday in Greenville that the two countries' relationship has turned the "bitter page" over the war in Iraq, but the coalition effort must succeed or face disastrous consequences.

Ambassador Jean-David Levitte said success will be defined by the Iraqis' ability to resolve their political and religious differences, how

the U.S. answers the question of establishing a timetable for military withdrawal and a regional and international effort to resolve the crisis.

"To clearly state that foreign troops are not in Iraq forever, that withdrawal will take place someday, it's an important message," Levitte said in an interview with editors and reporters of *The Greenville News*.

He was in Greenville on a trip organized by Michelin, whose North American headquarters is based

here, and to give the opening address Monday night at a Riley Institute conference at Furman University.

When the Iraq war loomed and then started, the United States and France went through a difficult period "because we had a different view," Levitte said in the interview.

He said France believed the war was not necessary because hundreds of United Nations inspectors had deployed throughout Iraq to search for weapons of mass destruction and be-

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cause French officials didn't see a connection between al-Qaida and Saddam Hussein.

Further, the officials thought the war would have dangerous consequences because of France's long experience in the Arab world, and that nation "learned the hard way" about Arab nationalities and the complexities of those societies, he said.

"But I would say this has passed," Levitte said. "We have turned, it seems to me, the bitter page of this difference. Now we all, including France, consider that if at the end of the day Iraq is not a success story, it will be a disaster, for not only the Iraqi people and the U.S., but for the whole region, because it will have ripple effects in the whole region."

He also said, "Even more important in our view, it will have dangerous consequences on the relations between the Muslim world as a whole and the West."

But beyond Iraq for France and the United States, "I see only reasons to celebrate our wonderful partnership on the world scene," Levitte said.

France doesn't have troops in Iraq and Levitte acknowledged the U.S. debate over withdrawal of troops in Iraq is a sensitive one. He wouldn't comment on France's specific recommendations for a timetable.

He reiterated, though, that France has said repeatedly "there is a need to have on the horizon the idea of the withdrawal of all foreign forces."

"Our conviction is that the future of Iraq is mostly in the hands of the Iraqis, and nobody can replace them in defining what will be their future," Levitte said.

In the interview, he also said:

■ This year's French election to replace President Jacques Chirac, who is 74, will result in a new generation and style of leadership since the main candidates to succeed him are in their 50s. But the U.S.-France relationship should continue improving and Levitte doesn't anticipate major change in foreign policy.

■ The European Union, a 27-country bloc that celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, has made major progress, as illustrated in the reconciliation between France and Germany, once archenemies.

The union, which represents nearly 500 million people, has led to peace and prosperity and "is an instrument to make war impossible between European people," Levitte said.

But French voters rejected the bloc's draft constitution two years ago and concerns aren't an academic problem, he said.

■ France spends 10 percent of its gross domestic product on health care, compared with 16 to 17 percent in the United States. All French citizens are covered, and pay higher taxes to use a plastic card for free access to doctors' treatment, hospital coverage and needed drug prescriptions.

■ France relies on nuclear energy, not foreign oil, to generate 80 percent of its electricity.

"When the first oil shock happened in 1973, it was a big les-

son," Levitte said. "We suddenly discovered that we were totally dependent on the Middle East. So the lesson was learned and we covered France with nuclear plants."

■ France has adopted the U.S. idea of technology clusters, such as those in Raleigh, Chapel Hill and elsewhere, that stress partnerships among universities, businesses and governments to promote biotechnology and medical research.

"The new Southeast is, No. 1, the result of these clusters," Levitte said. "The transformation — amazing transformation — of your economy is the result of these visionary leaders."

It is "a magnificent example of something we have to import," he said.

■ Michelin, Levitte said, "is a perfect example of what French companies have decided to do in the U.S. — that is to invest massively, to develop a long-term presence not only in production lines but also in research centers."

French companies represent 15,000 American jobs in South Carolina, and Michelin accounts for about half of that.

"The question is, should we do more in the new, booming region of the U.S., what is the greater Southeast, including South Carolina?" Levitte said. "The answer is, obviously, yes."