



Consulat général de France à New York

Speech of Mr. Philippe Lalliot,
Consulate General of France in New York

**Declaration on the occasion of the bestowal of the
Insignia of the Chevalier of the Order of the Legion of Honor of
Mr Paul Leclerc**

New York, Mayt 21, 2012

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends,
Cher Paul,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you this evening to the Consulate, for this ceremony in honor of Paul LeClerc. It is indeed a unique pleasure, since Paul represents an extraordinary career bearing the double signature, of excellence, and that of a Francophile, but also because, on a more personal level, he is a person I admire for his erudition, finesse and elegance. I will thus lead the ceremony today, as much an official representative, as a personal friend.

My dear Paul,

As the tradition of the French Republic goes, I shall try to give a portrait of you and your career path, before we proceed with the decoration of Officier in the National Order of the Legion of Honor. You must forgive me for this too short a summary, which will not fully render the richness of your lifelong experience.

Before you became President Emeritus of the New York Public Library – a subject I will come back to later – you have been a great Professor and a successful academic scholar.

I recently learned you had begun with a first degree in Biology at the College of the Holy Cross. Certainly a youthful mistake in the field of Exact Sciences, before joining the path which will remain your passion throughout the rest of your life: French Literature. After spending a year at the Sorbonne, you completed a Ph.D. in French Literature at Columbia University.

You began your academic career in 1966, chairing the Department of Modern Languages and the Division of Humanities at the Union College in Schenectady. In 1979 you came back to New York, and more precisely to the City University of New York, as Dean for Academic Programs and later Acting Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs. You then served as Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs of Baruch College. In 1988, you were appointed President of Hunter College, the largest public institution for higher education in New York City.

Such a prolific academic career, including numerous publications, has been recognized by the award of the doctorates *honoris causa* from 11 different universities around the world, including the Sorbonne Nouvelle in 2000.

Dear Paul,

1993 is a turning point in your career, as you became President of the New York Public Library, a great and venerable institution in the intellectual and cultural scene in New York. You have made – thanks to your energy and your vision – an international reference of her, and turned her into one of the largest libraries in the world, with more than 50 million books and documents.

In 18 years as President (a record of longevity), you have made the Library a modern center of intellectual flourishing. By multiplying the number of exhibitions, and by offering an unparalleled program of lectures, roundtables and concerts, you have transcended the customary boundaries of literature and made of the library a dynamic cultural home, committed to being a mirror to the main evolutions of our world, as well as to transmitting the heritage of the past.

You gave this great institution the means to achieve its ambitions. Its endowment has more than doubled under your Presidency. More than 500 million dollars were invested in long-term projects. The library holds 89 sites in Manhattan, the Bronx and in Staten Island. Towards the end of your presidency, you were recognized unanimously, not only as a brilliant academic and researcher, but also as an exceptional administrator and formidable fundraiser. A very rare mixture of qualities, we have to admit.

Dear Friends,

In order to get an idea of the path you Paul have taken, let us simply remember that at your arrival as President of the Public Library, when Google, Facebook and Twitter have not yet existed, the library did not even have an Internet website!

One of your greatest merits was to understand, very early on, what issues are at stake regarding the enormous revolution the book industry was about to undergo. You hence put yourself to the task of turning your institution into a leading one in matter of digital access. With more than 32 (yes, 32) million annual visitors from 220 different countries, the NYPL website only comes after the Library of Congress, and offers the number one online catalog in the world.

Digitizing the catalog was a colossal project and you faced it all the while providing greater access to eBooks, videos, music, and more than 700,000 images online. The

library's branches have also adapted themselves to the needs and wishes of the readers, including free Internet and Wifi access, granting the NYPL a smooth entry to our digital era.

You stepped down majestically, if I may say so, from your post as the NYPL's President last year. But it is by no means a retirement.

You are a trustee of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the J. Paul Getty Trust, the American Academy in Rome, the National Book Foundation, and the Carroll and Milton Petrie Foundation. President Clinton appointed you to the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities and you are also a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a member of the American Philosophical Society. Finally, and above all perhaps, you joined the university that had trained you, Columbia, once again, and took on new responsibilities, which I will get back to later on.

My dear Paul,

I would like to finish by mentioning the enormous contribution you have made to promoting French literature here, in the United States.

Even though you were born in Queens, your family name leaves no doubt about your origins. The French emigrant from whom you are descended was named Jacques Leclair and he arrived to The *Nouvelle-France* in 1667. His descendants in North America have enjoyed Canadian or American citizenship. But they have maintained continuous cultural and linguistic ties with France for close to four centuries. France is thus more than a passion for you – it is second family and homeland, which you have never left since that first year of 1963, when you were a student at the Sorbonne in Paris.

You were a Professor, admired by your students at Baruch College and Hunter College, as I said earlier but you are also a unanimously renowned researcher.

You told me that it was Father Alfred Desautels, a Jesuit priest of French-Canadian origin and a first generation American, who introduced you to Voltaire and to *Candide* when you were 18. However, because all of Voltaire's works were then on the Vatican's Index of forbidden books, you had to obtain the written permission of your Bishop to read *Candide* without committing a mortal sin. You did write to that Bishop, and, while you were at it, also asked for permission to read *Le Rouge et le Noir* and *Madame Bovary*.

The list may have been longer, if I may say so: *La Religieuse* could have been another good choice, not to mention the *Philosophie dans le boudoir*, as well as many other, spicier ones. I would like to ask you a question you might want to answer later: was there ever a section of forbidden books at the NYPL like there used to be one at the BnF (l'Enfer)?

In any case, permission was granted by your Bishop, and those texts, along with studying with that Jesuit, were the beginning of your career in French Studies and your ties to the country where Jacques Leclair was born.

A reputed specialist of the Enlightenment, you chose Voltaire, one of our greatest writers, un artisan du Verbe et un soldat de la plume. We are only to quote the just definition David Remnick gave of you in *The New Yorker*, "Dr. LeClerc is an unassumingly brilliant administrator and Voltaire scholar."

You are also a member of the Oxford University Editorial Board for the *Complete Works of Voltaire*, and have published many books at the University's Voltaire Foundation: in 1973 concerning the relation between the philosopher with *Crébillon père*, in 1992 with a commented edition of *Rome sauvée*, and, of course, with the 3-volume edition of the *Lettres d'André Morellet*, which was a major milestone.

At the New York Public Library, your passion for Voltaire and for the French 18th century in general has far from diminished. You have thus organized the exhibition "*Candide* at 250: Scandal and Success" which celebrated the 250th publication anniversary of this satirical masterpiece, in 2009. The Voltaire Collection at the library has vastly grown under your presidency, with the acquisitions of invaluable original manuscripts. It is now one of the three best collections of its kind in the world and serves as a rich resource for scholars and students of the Enlightenment.

Your support in favor of French literature, and your will to spread it even further, have driven you to organize many exhibitions involving French literary works, around the Fables de La Fontaine in 1995 (the first ever organized by a President of the New York Public Library), the concept of Utopia, in collaboration with the BnF in 2000 (which enjoyed a great success), as well as another exhibition about *Les Livres d'artistes*, in 2006, displaying the treasures of the Library Jacques Doucet to the public for the very first time.

In order to pay a true and complete tribute to your eclecticism, we must add to this already impressive list, under the rubric of "having fun at the Library," which is what Booke Astor instructed you to do when you went there as President in 1993: the "Renaissance bindings from the Royal Libraries of François I^{er} and Henri II", as well as "Art Deco bindings by Pierre Legrain and Rose Adler".

Though you left the Public Library last year, your love affair with France has far from waned. You are the Chairman of the Advisory Board at the Maison Francaise of Columbia University. The President of Columbia has recently appointed you as the Director of Global Center-Europe at *Reid Hall* in Paris, which is part of the "regional centers" network established worldwide by the University, with the objective of developing activities abroad. This nomination proves your loyalty to your *alma mater* you have never actually left, and also your interest in France, once again confirmed by your new mission.

Dear Friends, My dear Paul,

France has already made you Officier de l'Ordre des Palmes académiques in 1988, and Chevalier in the Legion of Honor in 1996. You were also rewarded with the Prix Blérancourt in 2004.

In recognition for your exceptional merits and your dedication to the cultural relations between France and the United States, the President of France decided to make you Officier in the Legion of Honor – an Order, I remind you, created by Napoleon in 1802, which remains to this day the most prestigious decoration the French Republic may grant, and which only counts an exclusive number of foreigners, especially when it comes to the rank of Officier.

Un dernier mot en français si vous le permettez, dans cette langue que vous maîtrisez si bien.

Un dernier hommage de l'amoureux des livres que je suis au Président d'une des plus belles bibliothèques du monde. Un dernier hommage aussi du normalien que j'ai été, formé comme vous pour enseigner la littérature française : votre carrière est celle que j'aurais aimé avoir si je n'avais pas trahi mes premières amours. Encore aurait-il fallu que j'aie vos talents ! J'en ai peut-être finalement moins de regrets.

Paul LeClerc, au nom du Président de la République et en vertu des pouvoirs qui nous sont conférés, nous vous faisons Officier dans l'Ordre de la Légion d'Honneur./.