

Sarkozy's maverick ways

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New Yorkers and Washingtonians unfamiliar with Nicolas Sarkozy might be forgiven if they thought the bouncy, pixyish politician they saw the other day was a new Republican running for Congress, the way he was pinning medals on police commissioners, jogging in Central Park, signing books, posing with President George W. Bush, vowing fealty to Israel and bashing France.

They might have been surprised to learn that he is head of President Jacques Chirac's party, that he is the interior minister of France, and that he is the front-runner in what looks to be a brutal race to succeed Chirac.

Mugging for shots with Bush and trying to smooth over French-American differences over Iraq hardly seems the way to win French votes. But "Sarko" knows his voters, and he knows that many of the same French men and women who are disdainful of the "cowboy" in the White House are also fascinated by all things American, and probably secretly admire the relative freedom and flexibility of the American way. While Sarkozy was in the White House, his most likely Socialist rival for the presidency, Ségolène Royal, was meeting with Prime Minister Romano Prodi of Italy. Guess who got the headlines?

In short, Sarkozy is playing the maverick because, after 11 years of the pompous Chirac, the French may well be looking for a cowboy of their own. Indeed, Sarkozy moved to the top of the French right by being a maverick saying the French must make a "dramatic break" with the social policies and habits that have made France the most cosseted, conservative and change-resistant land in Europe. He gets points with voters for being a Hungarian immigrant's son reaching for the top in a country whose politics are firmly dominated by an old-boy network of "grandes écoles" alumni.

A disaster for France and Europe

Unfortunately, Sarkozy's politics include a nasty anti-immigrant twist that plays to widespread antipathy among French whites for France's large population of Muslims originally from North Africa. Last week, in his first major speech after the summer, Sarkozy declared that he was firmly opposed to Turkey's inclusion in the European Union. More, he declared that it was time for the EU "to say who is European and who is not" meaning, of course, that Turkish Muslims are not. Sarkozy has not concealed his opposition to Turkish membership in the past, but making it the focus of his first major campaign address was a low appeal to the lowest nationalism. That is especially damaging since the Turks are growing increasingly disenchanted with the EU, and are likely to view Sarkozy's statement as further incentive to turn away from the West.

Sarkozy could have a lot to offer France if he confined his politics to shaking up the French system and restoring relations with the United States. Both are good ideas. But his pandering to the immigrant-bashing National Front crowd, and his efforts to set Europe on a collision course with Turkey, would be a disaster for France and Europe if it ever became French national policy.