



Five Years Post Iraq's War Official End, a New York Community Is Still Healing

The Iraq War has a lasting effect on New York's French-American community.

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NEW YORK - As the Iraq War's official end on December 18, 2011 marks its fifth anniversary, many questions remain on its fallouts. New York's French-American community is one of them, as it remembers its blacklisting when France opted out of attacking Iraq.

Choosing diplomatic pressure rather than "shock and awe" ignited fury for many in New York. The call for anti-French boycotts resonated in tabloids as pictures of New Yorkers spilling wines in gutters vied with accusations of an ally's betrayal and cowardice. Information can be found by googling "New York's French boycotts and Iraq."

How effective were the boycotts? "Very much so, even devastating," says French consulate's official physician and mental health coordinator at the time, Gérard Sunnen, MD, "the French-American community of New York was stunned by their virulence. Why, many wondered, did they materialize only in New York and nowhere else in the U.S.?"

"All French-American businesses were targeted, from Air France to bakeries. Rosters of circled companies were widely circulated. Earliest felled were restaurants, whose sales plummeted by as much as half. Like dominoes, they closed their doors and dismissed their workers. We called it the consulate's darkest hour, but it went on for weeks, interminable months, and still resonates today."

"As layoffs mounted," Dr. Sunnen added, "so did their mental health consequences, from all manner of stress reactions to self-destructive depressions. And workers suddenly out of work could not find employment because no one would take them. The consulate social services department's work load soared."

Faced with this onslaught, the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH) was repeatedly contacted to offer the community its medical and mental health assistance. In addition, New York top officials were asked to lend their voice to end the boycotts. All aid appeals remained unanswered and, for reasons of non-assistance and abandonment of responsibility, this matter was eventually reported and filed in New York and Federal courts.

Dr. Sunnen concludes, "history needs constant reckoning, otherwise it remains a fable. These events have been brought to light so that allies can better understand the true meaning of their relationship."

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