

President Chirac's speech

(mostly unofficial translation, with emphases added)

We are here—as the mayor has just recalled, and it is true—in a place steeped in history and emotion. Here, in adversity, the soul of the nation manifested itself. Here was the embodiment of our country's conscience.

Le Chambon-sur-Lignon is a place of memory. A place of resistance. A place symbolizing a France true to her principles, faithful to her heritage, true to her genius.

On this high plateau, with its harsh winters, in solitude, sometimes in poverty, often in adversity, women and men have long upheld the values that unite us.

In what was one of the most deprived areas of our country, standing up to all dangers, they chose courage, generosity and dignity.

They chose tolerance, solidarity and fraternity.

They chose the humanist principles that unite our national community and and serve as the basis for our collective destiny—the principles that make France what she is.

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The history of the villages of the "Plateau" mirrors the history of the struggle for freedom of conscience and for tolerance.

At the border of the Haute-Loire and the Ardèche, this old Protestant land suffered, from the moment of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, the ordeal of religious intolerance. In response, Protestantism had to engage in a painful struggle, a struggle for the nation, a struggle that led to the inclusion of religious freedom in our Declaration of the Rights of Man.

Because this countryside kept alive the memory of this drama, it became a place of welcome, of sharing and of refuge. Here, the persecuted, the disenfranchised, the refugees found an asylum. Here, Jews threatened with death found protection. Here, Resistance fighters of the *maquis* and the fighters in the shadows found shelter.

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This land of asylum is one of those places that breathes the spirit of resistance. This area, that paid a high price for freedom of conscience, very early on saw women and men arise to say no.

Led by admirable pastors and teachers, villagers and peasants of the "Plateau"—residents of Le Chambon and of the neighboring communities who shared the same ideal—will refuse, to cite the title of a book that was published here in Le Chambon, "the brown mornings." They will refuse the infamy of the Vichy regime. They will make their banner from the beautiful verb "to resist." They will turn each of their farms into a refuge. When others, backed by the French State, committed the irreparable, here, thousands of Jews, including many children hounded by the Nazis' threat of extermination, found hospitality and refuge. Here, they found salvation.

Anonymously, unobtrusively, in the simple thrust of the outstretched hand, of shared fraternity and humanity, rejecting the law of hatred, "the Plateau," Righteous Among the Nations, added to France.

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They were everywhere numerous, in the countryside as in the cities, these French women and men from all levels of society, of all beliefs, of all religions, whose courage and commitment will have allowed the rescue, sometimes at the risk of their lives, of two thirds of their Jewish compatriots.

Such is the France in which I believe. A France capable of the best, true to her history, to her roots, to her culture. A France of daring and solidarity, that surmounts her fears and extends herself to greet those who need her, who need her help, her protection, her support. A generous France that rejects selfishness or turning inward, that rejects exclusion and discrimination. An open and welcoming France, united in her diversity, who bears with pride her ideal of justice and peace in Europe and in the world.

We must be proud of this fraternal France. We must sustain and defend her. For all of us, every day, this must be the France we choose.

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This choice, to live together respecting every difference, is never made once and for all. Victory in the struggle for tolerance and for honor is fragile, with the battle always having to be fought anew.

Still today, odious and despicable acts of hatred are sullyng our country. Discrimination, antisemitism, racism—all kinds of racism—are again spreading insidiously. They are hitting our Jewish compatriots who have been in our country since time immemorial. They are hitting our Muslim compatriots who have chosen to work and live in our country. They are, in reality, hitting all our compatriots.

They are affecting our schools. They are threatening our children. They are desecrating our places of worship, our burial places, our strongest symbols.

All these acts which wound the body and shock the soul denote obscurantism, ignorance and stupidity. They express fanaticism and the desire to humiliate and abase. They reveal the rejection of difference and of the other.

All these acts reflect the darkest side of the human soul. They are unworthy of France. I will do everything possible to stop them.

The perpetrators of these acts, these assaults, these acts of hatred, which have, alas, increased in recent years and months, will be prosecuted relentlessly. They will be tried. They will be subject to the full rigor of our laws. I want the victims of these acts to know that the whole nation stands with them!

All our compatriots, whatever their history or beliefs, are entitled to respect. Thanks to the principle of secularity [*laïcité*], everyone can live and practice his or her religion in complete security, in complete safety. It enables state schools, the place where the values bequeathed to us all are acquired and passed on, to be open to all, regardless of persuasion. This is why it must be defended. State schools must be free from outside influences and passions. This is the purpose of the recently adopted law banning pupils from wearing conspicuous religious signs. The Republic is the common good of every citizen, with equal rights and duties. Equal opportunity is a requirement that we must realize to the full. It must be central to public action. To ensure this, an independent authority assigned the task of fighting discrimination will be established by the end of this year.

I am asking all our country's public officials, the government first,

and all civil servants—especially the police, administrative and judicial authorities, but also mayors and leaders of the regional and general councils—to show unwavering resolve in fighting these intolerable abuses. National cohesion is not the prerogative of any one camp. It cannot be a partisan issue. It must be our common goal.

I am asking the Minister of Justice to ensure that the prosecuting authorities act extremely firmly in all these cases of exclusion, all these instances where individuals reject the other, which of course the law condemns. To take, each time, the requisite steps to ask the courts to hand down extremely severe and exemplary sentences for acts which are the very negation of the values which bring our nation together. Dropping cases of racism, antisemitism, xenophobia and homophobia is unacceptable. Every act must be punished. Similarly, I would like prosecutors to appeal whenever they consider court decisions too lenient in view of the seriousness of the acts prosecuted. The very principle of justice is at stake here.

I am asking the Minister for National Education and all our teachers to take more care than ever to ensure that our republican principles, law and history are passed on to and shared by all French young people. The teaching of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship must be at the heart of the missions of the republican school—so that, at a very young age, everyone acquires the sense of belonging fully to the national community, feels proud to be a French citizen, is more aware of the rights and duties it entails, and of the behavior and common rules of life it implies. This will be one of the priority objectives of the Education Outline Bill which the government will present to Parliament before the end of the year.

I want all mayors in France—who know the local situation better than anyone and are often the best placed to anticipate, prevent and respond locally, quickly and justly—to mobilize to the maximum, with the assistance of the State, on these questions which are essential to our life together and our future. I am asking the government to ensure that the prefects examine with the mayors measures and initiatives that will be useful in increasing prevention and combating this unacceptable behavior.

And I make this request here in Le Chambon because you have set the example.

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But no matter how absolute the determination of the public authorities—which I pledge—the will and the action of the state and of local authorities, cannot, on their own, suffice.

The example of the "Plateau" shows us that it is the commitment of each of us, and the solidarity of all, day after day, that lead to the strength and the exemplary potential of human communities. It illustrates the irresistible drive, even in adversity, towards a sense of fraternity based on respect for shared rules and principles. A fraternity aware of the requirements of "living together" and of responsible citizenship.

In response to the risk of indifference and passivity in everyday life, I call on every French man and woman to be vigilant. Confronted with the danger, I call on them to act and act now.

In the face of growing intolerance, racism and antisemitism, the rejection of differences, I ask them to remember a still recent past. I tell them to remain true to the lessons of history, such recent history. I urge them always to remind their children of the mortal danger of fanaticism, exclusion, cowardice, and abdication in the face of extremism. I ask them to demonstrate forcefully our resolution, our common capacity to live in harmony and respect one another.

I ask them always to bear our heritage with pride. France, the home of human rights, has inscribed on her public buildings the universal values of mankind. She has made Liberty, Equality and Fraternity the motto of the Republic. Let us remind our children that the entire history of the French nation is punctuated with such battles, sometimes terrible ones, but battles which placed tolerance and the protection of the weakest in the forefront of our principles. Battles waged by the great minds, the great philosophers who forged our culture. Battles fought by the most humble, who have often remained anonymous, whose commitment, and sometimes supreme sacrifice, have done so much for the honor and greatness of France and the French.

Just days before our July 14th celebration, the symbol of our fraternity, I call on each and everyone to close ranks, so that together, true to our values, we can put into practice a certain idea of man and a certain idea of France.

I thank you.