

ZELENSKY WASN'T THE FIRST UKRAINIAN PRESIDENT TO ADDRESS A JOINT MEETING OF CONGRESS

President Zelenskyy wasn't the first Ukrainian president to address a joint meeting of Congress, but he sounded a lot like President Yushchenko did in 2005. Slava Ukraini, indeed.

THE CHICKS ARE OWED AN APOLOGY

Once upon a time, back when the United States was under the leadership of another fairly incompetent Republican President (yes yes, Bush and Cheney look a little better now compared to Trump and Pence, but only because they were actually semi-competent in their evil, but they were still very evil), there was was sensationally good crossover country/pop group known as the Dixie Chicks.

They were country, but never of the "stars and bars" Dixie kind. It was simply an appellation. In fact, they were all pretty forward and progressive thinking and talking. And man did they get in trouble for it. I guess the new term of the day is "cancelled", which is kind of an idiotic term, but the howlers really did try to obliterate Natalie Maines, Emily Strayer and Martie Maguire. From Wiki:

On March 10, 2003, nine days before the invasion of Iraq, the Dixie Chicks performed at the Shepherd's Bush Empire theater in London, England. It was the

first concert of their Top of the World tour in support of their sixth album, Home. Introducing their song "Travelin' Soldier", Maines told the audience the band they did not support the upcoming Allied invasion of Iraq and were "ashamed" that President George W. Bush was from Texas. Many American country music listeners supported the war, and Maines's remark triggered a backlash in the United States. The Dixie Chicks were blacklisted by thousands of country radio stations, and the band members received death threats. Maines issued an apology, saying her remark had been disrespectful; in 2006 she rescinded the apology, saying she felt Bush deserved no respect. The backlash damaged sales of their music and sales of their next album and tour.

In a September 2003 interview, Maguire told the German magazine Der Spiegel: "We don't feel a part of the country scene any longer, it can't be our home anymore." She noted a lack of support from country stars, and being shunned at the 2003 ACM Awards. "Instead, we won three Grammys against much stronger competition. So we now consider ourselves part of the big rock 'n' roll family." Some fans were dismayed, but the group made no clear response.

If you have forgotten, which is awfully easy to do in these pandemic days of Trump, this was a huge deal at the time. The United States government under the Bush/Cheney regime, and the entire country music scene hated on them and ostracized them. It was one of those kind of fulcrum moments. It was not just the Iraq war, it was torture, the unitary executive, free speech, protest....everything was wrapped up, in a cultural way, in the actions of the Dixie Chicks. It was symbolic of the divide.

But Natalie Maines, Emily Strayer and Martie

Maguire were bad ass and stuck to their morals and thoughts. They got hammered at the time, but they hung in and are still here bigger and badder ass than ever. They are now just The Chicks, having dumped the Dixie part of their original name. The Chicks are owed a debt of gratitude and an apology for the idiocy and bigotry they faced from the howlers during the Bush/Cheney years, and they are here to let you know they are still on the good side of the cutting edge.

The Chicks have a new song and video out. "March March", and it is truly awesome. A song for this time. I saw it last night at Atrios' joint, and it is really superb. Take a look. Expand it and watch it full screen, it is worth it. This is the music of protest, and in the best way. Music was key in the 60's and it is key now. It spreads far and wide what people feel, whether they are in the streets or at home. The "at home" part seems even more pertinent now in the time of unabated pandemic at the hands of yet another evil Administration. And that is our trash talk for this weekend, get on it!

IN DIRE NEED OF CREATIVE EXTREMISTS

Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" is more than 50 years old, yet it reads like it was written yesterday. In that letter, King identified "the great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom" not as the hoodwearing Klanners or the politically powerful White Citizens Council folks, but the Moderate. Fortunately, King also identified the cure to that block, if only we'd embrace it.

MACRON'S CHRISTMAS: GRABBING THE THIRD RAIL OF FRENCH POLITICS

Things are not going well for Macron's government in the run up to Christmas. Pensions are like that old saying about Social Security, they are the third rail of French politics. Former President Chirac tried to reform the pension system twice, and faced so much action in the street he had to mostly back down in both 1995 and 2003. Then Sarkozy tried again in 2010, without managing to reform much more than Chirac did. Marcon is not so much touching the third rail as tying his government to the substation at this point.

According to the government there are two reasons the pensions need to be reformed: firstly there are 42 different plans that need to be simplified and streamlined so that anyone, including the government, can understand them. The government has proposed making one plan for all. (Though this principle has already fallen to political expediency and keeping the police unions happy, and there are now more than one being proposed) Secondly, they're doomed to run into the red by billions of euros, though there seems to be a lot of variation in how many billions of euros different people project.

The reasoning gets a little trickier than it might seem when you look closer. 42 pension plans is a lot, but they cover a broad swatch of work, from construction and firefighters to train drivers and accountants and computer programmers. Having one retirement age to cover both firefighting and computer programming doesn't make much sense. A seventy-year-old can take up programming for the first time and find

themselves productive and engaged, 40 years of firefighting breaks the human body.

As for the shortfall, it's complicated. Much like the Social Security shortfall in America, it's a bit of an accounting trick one way or the other. French workers pay into it, have paid into it, and will keep paying into it along with the rest of their considerable tax burden. There's money, just not a lot of clarity on how to spend it. Any shortfall in pension funding represents somewhere else the government gets to spend, such as Macron's love of cutting taxes to make France more business friendly, or revitalizing transit in remote areas, or paying nurses.

There's no reason to believe Macron is eager to pay nurses, though he has been eager to get rid of wealth taxes. There's also no reason to believe that the proposals are actually intended to address any shortfall – as the government has faced resistance it's put the reforms out further into the future, and changed nothing about how Baby Boomers will retire, despite the Boomers being the source of retirement shortfalls all over the developed world. In fact, the proposal is so gradual the only people who would be fully affected by it are currently too young to vote.

Macron has said nothing recently about any of this. He's made his prime minister, Édouard Philippe, the face of recent announcements, along with the minister appointed by the administration to manage pension reform, Jean-Paul Delevoye. Phillippe has been somewhat damaged in public view, but Delevoye, an old Chirac minister who turned En Marche! at the moment when it became politically expedient for everyone to turn En Marche! in 2017, had to leave office after several newspapers reported that he had illegal conflicting contracts with his role as pension minister. He has not been replaced as of this writing. Lines for political suicide are often short. How this week goes will probably also determine the fate of Philippe.

On a side note, never join a political party that has an exclamation point in its name.

Macron's neoliberalism seems to be descending into a kind of absurd nihilism where nothing gets cheaper for the government, but also no one has as much as they used to. (Trust it to the French to make something as boring as national budgeting into a screaming abyss of nihilism into which seemingly endless passion is poured from the streets of Paris.) His government has no trust with most people, and even when En Marche! supporters speak out, it's often with disdain towards the majority of their fellow French people. Most often I have heard that they're lazy and want everything to be given to them.

But the French are not very good at lazy. Private company workers have struggled through terrible traffic to get to work during the strike. Bike use has spiked. The protestors and strikers have taken streets, blocked fuel depots and bus depots. Transport strikers are being joined by schools, libraries, museums, and as of today, trash collectors. To restate my constant refrain, the French have nice things because they take them, but that's never easy or simple. The country is paralyzed, and right now neither side seems inclined to blink.

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FRANCE STRIKES, WITH FIREFIGHTERS AT

CENTER STAGE

Few protest camps were as unusual as the one on Place de la République this week. On Wednesday night the Sapeurs-Pompiers (French for Firefighters) gathered around a fire in front of their tents on the old and famous la République, where they had set up on Monday. Around 15-20 were sleeping on site, and a changing cast of twenty or so more visitors, including me and my translator, were stopping by to chat with them.

They are camping until Friday, and like many of their colleagues, they were getting ready for the general strike and protest that happened today in cities all around France. They were dressed in their firefighting gear, good enough protection against the biting cold of the Parisian winter. The pompiers were all smiles, brewing fresh coffee and chatting with passersby. Two were even happy to try out their English with an American, before giving up and just talking to my translator. "It's about the cost, the money," Claire, a pompier from Nice, said to me, before reverting to French. In translation, Claire and another companion who didn't give her name continued: the Pompiers pay more into their pensions because their job is high risk, and because they have to retire earlier than most other professions due to the harshness of the job on their bodies. But Macron's plan to reform the pension system threatened them, potentially with less benefits or a later retirement age, and they wouldn't have it. Pompiers all over France wouldn't have it, along with train workers, nurses, doctors, teachers, and so on.

The trains aren't running, nor is the Paris Metro, hospitals are on skeleton crews, the firefighters were on the streets of Paris instead of in their firehouses, with what felt like everyone else in the world also on the streets of Paris, if you were trying to get through the crowd. One of the biggest strikes in recent French history was accompanied by one of

the largest protests since a similar effort to reform pensions in 1995. The presence of the firefighters in the crowd was electric. They were the heroes of the day, people sang to them, the police mostly avoided tangling with them. At one point, when a group stopped to wait for other pompiers to catch up, a nearby group of perimeter police quickly put on their riot helmets.

The crowd was estimated between 800,000 (Traditional police lowballing) and 1.5 million (Traditional organizer highballing). Let's say 1.1 million, because the journalist normally just picks a number between them, and the fact is no one ever actually knows how many people are protesting. The germane answer is: a lot. Life in France was largely put on hold, as the unions engaged in France's true national sport.

French unions consist of five major confederations of trade unions that represent most union workers and negotiate directly with the government, as well as other smaller unions that represent a wide range of mostly public sector workers, as well as political positions from centrists to anarcho-syndicalists. But the unions only represent about 11% of France's workers as of 2013, down from about 30% in the 1950s. Everyone else grumbles these union workers have it much better than the rest of France, and that they strike and complain too much.

This position seems to be stated by many of the non-unionized French workforce without a hint of irony or self-reflection. France is a country where the few protect the rights and social safety net of the greater number, while pissing off absolutely everyone.

What has prompted them this time is the deeply unpopular President Macron's amorphous and secretive plan to reform and combine French pension programs to streamline them and save money as they start to head into the red in the coming years. Macron's administration has tried to say soothing things about their plan, and

involve the unions in the process, but no one in France trusts Macron's administration as far as they could throw the Élysée Palace. He consistently polls less popular with the French than Trump is with Americans, and that's not easy to do. He also tends to act like he's a petulant little king of France, an attitude that's given rise to a lot of protests, walk outs, and political quagmires, of which the leaderless Gilets Jaunes (Yellow vests) movement is only the most famous example.

At the same time Macron is trying to assure everyone things will be alright and they can put their retiring livelihoods into his profoundly neoliberal hands, his administration sent the police unions a letter saying police pensions would remain unchanged by the government, whatever happened to anyone else. If there was one lesson the Roman emperors who once held Gaul passed on to their successors it was pay the people who fight for you, and pay them well. Macron claims not to be an autocrat, but he sure pays his muscle like one.

This strike is now ongoing, and having caught one of the last trains to Paris, I appear to be staying for a while. Words and pictures to follow, and I have more details and pictures in this Twitter thread.

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