

The Human Crisis

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Introduction: Ladies and Gentlemen: when I was invited to give a series of lectures in the United States of America, I felt some doubt and hesitation. I am really not old enough to give lectures, and I am more at ease with the process of thinking than I am making categorical statements... since I don't feel I have any claim on what is generally called the truth. I shared this reservation and was very politely told that my personal opinion didn't matter. What mattered was that I'd be able to offer some facts about France so that my listeners could form their own opinions. It was then suggested that I might inform my audience as to the current state of the French theater, French literature, and even French philosophy. I replied that it might be more interesting to talk about the extraordinary efforts of French railway workers, or about the kind of work the coal miners in the North are doing. But then I was told, quite rightly, that once should never force one's talents, and that these different subjects ought to be discussed by the experts. Since I clearly know nothing about railroad switches, and I had been interested in literary questions for a long time, it was only natural to speak about literature rather than train. At last, I understood. What mattered finally was that I talk about what I know and give some sense of what is happening in France. For precisely that reason I have chosen to speak neither about literature nor about theater. Literature, theater, philosophy, research and the efforts of an entire nation are merely reflections of a fundamental question: of a struggle for life and for humanity that preoccupies us in this moment.

The French people sense that mankind is still under threat. And they also sense that to continue living they must rescue a certain idea of mankind from the crisis that grips the whole world. Out of loyalty to my country, I have chosen to speak about this human crisis.

Since I am here to talk about what I know, the best I can do is sketch, as clearly as I can, the moral experience of my generation. Because we have seen the world crisis unfold, and our experience might shed a glimmer of light, both on the fate of mankind and, on some aspects, of the sensibilities of the French people today. First I would like to define this generation for you.

People of my age in France and in Europe were born either before or during the first great war, reached adolescence during the worldwide economic depression, and turned 20 the year of Hitler's rise to power. To complete their education next came the civil war in Spain, the Munich Agreements, the start of another world war in 1939, the fall of France in 1940, and 4 years of enemy occupation and underground struggle. I suppose this is what is known as an interesting generation, and that it would be more useful to speak to you not in my own name, but in the

name of a certain number of French people who are 30 years old today and whose intelligence and hearts were formed during the terrible years when, like their country, they were nourished on shame and lived by rebellion. Yes this is an interesting generation. Faced with the absurd world its elders had concocted, it believed in nothing and yearned to rebel. The literature of its time was in revolt against lucidity, against narrative, and against the very idea of a sentence. Painting was abstract, that is to say, it was rebelling against figurativism, realism, and simple harmony. Music was rejecting melody. And as for philosophy, it taught us that there was no truth, only phenomena. That Mr. Smith, Monsieur Duran Herr Vogel, might all exist as phenomena but without these 3 particular phenomena having anything in common. The moral attitude of our generation was even more categorical. Nationalism seemed an outmoded truth, and religion an escape. 25 years of international politics had taught us to question any notion of purity and to conclude that no one was ever wrong because everyone might be right. As for our society's traditional morality, it seemed to us that it hadn't stopped being what it had always been: a monstrous hypocrisy. Thus we lived in negation. Of course, that was nothing new. Other generations and other countries had experienced this in other periods of history. But what is new here is that these same men, strangers to any traditional values, had been forced to adapt their personal positions to a context of murder and terror. The situation led them to believe there might be a human crisis, as they had to live the most wrenching of contradiction. This was because they entered the war as one enters hell; if it is true that hell is denial. They loved neither war nor violence, yet they had to accept war and practice violence. They hated nothing except hatred, yet they were forced to learn that difficult science. They had to deal with terror, or rather terror dealt with them. They found themselves confronted with a situation that, rather than try to describe it in general terms, I would like to illustrate through 4 short stories about a time the world is beginning to forget, but which still burns in our hearts.

1. In an apartment building occupied by the Gestapo in a European capital, 2 accused men, still bleeding, find themselves tied up after a night of investigation. The concierge of the building begins her careful household chores in good spirit since she probably just finished breakfast. Reproached by one of the tortured men, she replies indignantly, "I never interfere with my tenants business." 2. In Leon, one of my comrades is dragged from his cell for a 3rd round of questioning. Since his ears have been badly torn during a previous session, he is wearing a bandage around his head. The German officer who interrogates him is the same man who conducted the previous sessions. And yet he asks him, with an air of affectionate concern, "How are your ears doing?" 3. In Greece, after an underground resistance operation, a German officer prepares the executions of 3 brothers he has taken as hostages. Their old mother throws herself at his feet and he agrees to save one of them. But only at the condition that she designate which one. She chooses the oldest because he has a family, but her choice condemns the 2 others. Just as the German officer intended. 4. A group of deported women, including one of our comrades, is repatriated to France by way of Switzerland. As soon as they enter Swiss territory, they notice a funeral taking place. And the mere sight of this spectacle sets off their hysterical laughter. "That's how the dead are treated here!" they say.

I've chosen these stories because they allow me to respond with something other than a conventional yes, to the question is there a human crisis?. They allow me to reply just as the men I was speaking about replied, "Yes. there is a human crisis because in today's world we can contemplate the death or the torture of a human being with a feeling of indifference, friendly concern, scientific interest, or simple passivity." Yes. There is a human crisis. Since putting a

person to death can be regarded with something other than the horror and scandal it ought to provoke. Since human suffering is accepted as a somewhat boring obligation, on a par with getting supply or having to stand in line for an ounce of butter. It is too easy in this matter to simply accuse Hitler and to say, "Since the beast is dead, its venom is gone." We know perfectly well that the venom is not gone, that each of us carries it in our own hearts. And we can sense this by the way that nations, political parties, and individuals continue to regard one another with the vestiges of anger. I have always believed that a nation is accountable for its traitors as well as for its heroes. But likewise, civilization, the white man civilization, in particular, are as responsible for their perversions as for their successes. In this light, we are all answerable for the legacy of Hitler and must attempt to discover the most general causes of the terrible evil that has eaten away the face of Europe.

Let us try them with the help of the 4 stories I have told to innumerate the most obvious symptoms of the crisis. The first symptom is the rise of terror. A consequence of the perversion of values that human beings and historical forces are judged not in terms of their dignities, but in terms of their success. The modern crisis is inevitable because no one in the West can be sure of their immediate future, and all live with the more-or-less defined fear that they will be crushed to bits, one way or another, by history. To save this miserable man, this modern day Job, from perishing of his wound and his own dunghill, we must first lift the burden of fear and anxiety so he can rediscover the freedom of thought he will need to resolve any of the problems facing the modern conscience. This crisis is also based on the impossibility of persuasion. People can only really live if they believe they have something in common, something that brings them together. If they address someone humanely they expect a human response. However, we have discovered that certain men cannot be persuaded. A victim of the concentration camps cannot hope to explain to the SS men who are beating him that they ought to not to. The greek mother I spoke about could not persuade the German officer that he had no right to force her into heartbreak. The SS and the German Officer no longer represented man or mankind, but rather an instinct elevated to the status of an idea or theory. Passion, even deadly passion, would have been preferable. For passion runs its course, and another passion, another cry from the flesh or the heart, might replace it. But a man capable of tender concern for ears that he has only recently torn is not passionate. He is a mathematical calculation that cannot be restrained or reasoned with. This crisis is also about replacing real thing with printed matter, that is to say, the growth of bureaucracy. Contemporary man tends more and more to put between himself and nature an abstract and complex machinery that casts him into solitude. Only when there is no more bread do bread coupons appear. The people of France subsist on 1200 calorie-a-day diet, but they have at least 6 different forms and a hundred official stamps on each one of those forms. It is the same way everywhere where bureaucracy is expanding. To get from France to America I used a lot of paper in both places, so much paper that I could have probably printed enough copies of this talk to have it distributed here without having to show up. With so much paper, so many offices and functionaries, we are creating a world in which human warmth has disappeared. Where no one can come into contact with anyone else except across a maze of what we call "formalities". The German officer who spoke with care of the shredded ears of my comrade thought this was fine, since tearing them was part of his official business, and there could not, therefore, be anything wrong with it. In sum, one no longer dies, one no longer loves, and one no longer kills, except by proxy. This, I suppose, is what is called good organization. The crisis is also about replacing real men with political men. Individual passion is no longer possible, only collective, that is to

say, abstract passions. Whether we like it or not, we cannot avoid politics. It no longer matters that we respect or prevent a mother's suffering. What counts is ensuring the triumph of a doctrine. Human suffering is no longer considered a scandal, it is merely one variable in a reckoning whose terrible sums has not yet been calculated. It is clear that these different symptoms can be summed up by something that might be described as the cult of efficiency and abstraction. This is why Europeans today know only solitude and silence. They can no longer communicate with others through shared values. And since they are no longer protected by mutual respects based on those values, their only alternatives is to become victims or executioners.

This is what the men and women of my generation have understood. This is the crisis they face and are still facing. We attempted to solve it with the values at our disposal, by which I mean no values at all other than an awareness of the absurdity of our lives. It was in this frame of mind we were introduced to war and terror, with no consolation or certainty. We only knew we could not yield to the brutes taking charge in the 4 corners of Europe. But we had no idea how to justify our resistance. Even the most lucid among us realize they knew of no principle in whose name they could oppose terror and repudiate murder. For if one believes in nothing, if nothing makes sense and one is unable to affirm any value, then everything is permitted and nothing is important. Hence there is neither good nor evil, and Hitler was neither wrong nor right. One could lead millions of innocents to the crematorium as easily as one may devote oneself to curing leprosy; one can tear a man's ear with one hand and soothe him with the other; one can clean a house in front of men who had just been tortured; one can honor the dead or throw them in the garbage. It is all the same. And since we thought that nothing made sense, we had to conclude that the man who succeeds is in the right. And this is so true that even today plenty of intelligent skeptics will tell you that if Hitler had by chance won the war, history would have paid him homage and consecrated the hideous pedestal in which he perched. And there can be no doubt that history, as we conceive of it today, would have consecrated Hitler and justified terror and murder just as we all consecrate murder and terror when we have the temerity to think that everything is meaningless.

Some among us, it is true, did think it might be possible in the absence of any higher value to believe history had meaning. In any case, they often acted as if they thought so. They said that this was necessary as it would liquidate the air of nationalisms and prepare for a time where empire would finally give way, wither without a fight, to universal society and heaven on earth. With this thought they came to the same conclusion that we did: nothing made sense. For if history has meaning, that meaning must be total or be nothing at all. These men thought and acted as if history obeyed some transcendent dialectic, as if we were all moving together to some definite goal. They thought and acted according to Hegel's detestable principle: "Man is made for history, not history for man." In truth, the political and moral realism that hold sway in today's world is heir to a Germanic philosophy of history according to which, all of humanity is on the march, moving rationally towards a definitive universe. Nihilism has been replaced by absolute rationalism, and in both cases, the results are the same. For if it true that history obeys a transcendent and inevitable logic, if it is true according to this German philosophy that the feudal state must replace the state of anarchy, that nation-states must replace feudalism, and that empires must then take the place of nation-states until at last, they lead to the creation of a universal society, then anything supporting this inevitable process is good and the achievements of history are definitive truth. And since these achievements can only be obtained by the usual means of wars, conspiracies, and individual and mass murders, actions cannot be justified on the

basis of good or evil but only by how efficient they are. And so in today's world, the men and women of my generation had been lured by a double temptation: thinking that nothing is true or thinking that only the inevitable forces of history are true. Many of them succumb to one or the other of these temptations, which is how the world came to be ruled by the will to power and, consequently, terror. For if nothing is true or false, good or bad, and if the only value is efficiency, the rule of the day is to be the most efficiency, meaning the strongest. The world is no longer divided into the just or unjust, but into masters and slave. He who is right is he who enslaves. The housekeeper is right, not the victim of torture. The German officer who tortures and the one who executes, the SS men transformed into grave diggers, these are the reasonable men of this new world. Look around you and see if it isn't still the case. Violence has a stranglehold on us. Inside every nation, and the world at large, mistrust, resentment, greed, and the race for power are manufacturing a dark, desperate universe in which each man is condemned to live within the limit of the present. The very notion of the future fills him with anguish, for he is captive to abstract powers, starved and confused by harried living, and estranged from nature's truth, from sensible leisure, and simple happiness. Perhaps you who dwell in this still happy America do not see this or cannot see it clearly. But the men I am talking about had been seeing it for years, and had felt this evil in their flesh, read it on the faces of those they love, and deep in their ailing hearts, a terrible revolt will rise up that will sweep everything away. They are still haunted by too many monstrous images to imagine it will be easy to do, but they are too deeply marked by the horror of those years to allow it to continue.

Here is where their true problem begins. If the features of this crisis are the will to power, terror, the replacement of real man by political and historical man, the reign of abstraction and fatality, and solitude without a future, then these are the features we have to change to resolve this crisis. Our generation found itself faced with this immense problem and all that it negated.

We had to draw the strength to fight from these very negations. It was perfectly useless to tell us "you must believe in god, or in Plato, or in Marx," precisely because we did not have that kind of faith. The only question was whether we were going to accept a world in which we could only be a victim or an executioner. Of course, we wanted to be neither because we knew from the bottom of our hearts that this distinction was an illusion and that when it came down to it, there were only victims. Since killing and being killed would amount to the same thing in the end, that murderers and murdered would all eventually suffer the same defeat. The problem was no longer whether to accept or reject this condition and this world, but rather to know what reason we might have to oppose it. This is why we have looked for our reasons in the very revolt that led us, for no apparent reason, to choose to fight evil. And we understood that we were rebelling not only for ourselves but for something shared by all men. How did this happen? In this world stripped of values, in this desert of the heart in which we dwelled, what in fact could revolt signify? It made us into people who said no, but at the same time, we were people who said yes. We said no to the world, to its essential absurdity, to the abstractions that threatened us, to the civilization of death that was being prepared for us. By saying no we declared that things had lasted long enough, and there was a line that could not be crossed, but at the same time we affirmed everything that felt short of that line. We affirmed that there was something within us that rejected the scandal of human suffering and could not be humiliated for too long. Of course, this contradiction should have given us pause. We thought the world existed and struggled without any real values. And yet there we were, in a struggle against Germany. The French I knew in the resistance, who read Montaigne in the train while smuggling their pamphlets, proved that we could, at least in our

country, understand the skeptics while retaining a sense of honor. And all of us consequently by virtue of the simple fact that we lived, hoped, and fought, were affirming something. But did this something have general value? Was it more than the opinion of an individual and could it serve as a rule of conduct? The response is quite simply.

The men who I am speaking about were ready to die in the course of their revolt. Death would prove that they sacrificed themselves for a truth greater than their individual existence, and that exceeded their individual destiny. What our rebels were defending against a hostile fate was a value common to all people. When men were tortured in the presence of their housekeeper; when ears were hacked with diligence; when mothers were forced to condemn their children to death; when the just were buried like pigs; these men in revolt judged that something in them was being denied. Something that belonged not only to them but was a common good through which all men could achieve solidarity. Yes, that was the great lesson of those disastrous years. That an insult aimed at a student in Prague affected a worker in the Paris suburbs. That blood spilled somewhere in the banks of an Eastern European river could lead a Texas farmer to spill his own on the ground of the Ardennes that he just got to know. And even this was absurd and crazy, impossible or nearly impossible to contemplate. But at the same time, there was, in that absurdity, the lesson that we found ourselves in a collective tragedy where a sense of shared dignity was at stake. A communion among men that had to be defended and sustained. With that in mind, we knew how to act and we learned that people, even in situations of absolute moral degradation, can find sufficient values to guide their conduct. Once people began to realize the truth lay in communicating with each other, and mutual recognition of each other's dignity, it became clear that this very communication was what had to be served. To maintain this communication, men needed to be free, since a master and a slave have nothing in common. And one cannot speak and communicate with a slave. Yes, bondage is a silence. The most terrible silence of all. To maintain this communication we had to eliminate injustice because there is no contact between the oppressed and the profiteer. Need is also relegated to silence. To maintain this communication we had to eliminate lying and violence. For the man who lies closes himself off from other men, and he who tortures and constrains imposes an irrevocable silence. From the negative impetus that was the starting point of our revolt, we drew an ethos of liberty and sincerity. Yes, it was the act of communication that was needed to oppose the murderous world. That's what we understood going forward, and this communication must be maintained today if we are to protect ourselves from murder.

As we know now, we must fight against injustice, against slavery and terror. Because these 3 scourges are what makes silence reign among men, what builds barriers between them, what renders them invisible to one another and prevent them from finding the only value that might save them from this desperate world: the extended of man's struggling against fate. At the end of this long night, we finally know that what we must do in the face of this crisis torn world. What must we do? Call things by their name and understand that we kill millions of people each time we agree to think certain thoughts. You don't think badly because you think you are a murderer, you are a murderer because you think badly. Hence, you can be a murderer without ever having killed, and this is why we are all more or less murderers. The first thing to do is simply to reject in thought and action any acquiescent or fatalistic way of thinking. The second thing to do is to unburden the world of the terror that reigns today and prevents clear thought. And since I've been told that the United Nations is holding an important session in this very city, we might suggest that the first written text of this global organization should solemnly proclaim, in the

wake of the Nuremberg trial, a worldwide abolition of capital punishment. The third thing to do, whenever possible, is to put politics back in its true place, a secondary one. We need not furnish the world with a political or moral gospel or catechism. The great misfortune of our time is precisely that politics pretends to provide us with a catechism, with a complete philosophy, and sometimes even with rules for loving. But the role of politics is to keep things in order, and not to regulate our inner problems. As for me, I don't know if there is any absolute. If there is one, I know that it is not of a political order. The absolute is not something that we can decide on as a whole, it's for each of us to think of individually. Each of us has the inner freedom to reflect on the meaning of the absolute. And our external relationships should allow us that freedom. Our life undoubtedly belongs to others, and it is right to sacrifice it if necessary. But our death belongs only to us. This is my definition of freedom.

The fourth thing to be done is to seek out and to create, on the very foundation of our negativity, positive values that will reconcile negative thought with the potential for positive action. That is the work of philosophers, which I have barely touched upon here.

The fifth thing is to fully understand that this attitude means creating a universalism in which all people of good will can come together. To leave solitude behind we must speak. But we must always speak frankly and on all occasions never lie and always say everything we know to be true. But we can only speak a truth in a world in which it is defined and found in values shared by everyone. It isn't Mr. Hitler who decides what's true or false. Nobody in this world, now or ever, should have the right to decide that their own truth is good enough to impose on others. For only the shared consciousness of men and women can realize this ambition. The values sustaining this shared consciousness must be rediscovered. The freedom we must finally win is the freedom not to lie. Only then can we discover our reasons for living and for dying. So here is where we stand, and I probably took the long way there, but after all the history of mankind is the history of its errors, not its truths. Truth is probably like happiness, simple and without a history. Does this mean we've resolved all of our problems? No, of course not. The world is neither better nor more reasonable. We still haven't left absurdity behind, but we have at least one reason to force ourselves to change our behavior, and this is the reason we've been missing. The world would still be a desperate place if men and women didn't exist. But they do, along with their passions, their dreams, and their communion. A few of us in Europe have combined a pessimistic view of the world with a profound optimism for humankind. We can't pretend to escape from history for we are in history. We can only aspire to do battle in the arena of history to save from it that part of man which does not belong to it. We want only to rediscover the paths to civilization where man, without turning his back on history, will no longer be enslaved by it. With the obligation each person incurs with regard to others will be balanced by time for reflection, pleasure, and the happiness every person owes themselves. I would venture to say that we will always refuse to worship events, facts, wealth, power, history as it unfolds, and whatever the world becomes. We want to see the human condition for what it is. We know what it is. It is this terrible condition that takes truckloads of blood and centuries of history to arrive at some imperceptible shift in human destiny. Such is the law. For years during the 18th-century heads fell like hail in France. The French revolution inflamed all hearts with enthusiasm and terror. Eventually at the start of the next century, we eventually replaced traditional monarchy with constitutional monarchy. We who live in France in the 20th century know this terrible law only too well. It took war, the occupation, massacres, a thousand prison walls, and a Europe wracked by grief for a few of us to finally grasp 2 or 3 insights that might slightly diminish our despair. In a situation like

ours, optimism seems scandalous. We know that those of us who are dead today were the best among us, since they appointed themselves. And we who are still living must remind ourselves that we are only alive because we did less than others. And this is why we continue to live a contradiction. The only difference is that this generation can now join this contradiction to an immense hope for humankind. Since I wanted to tell you something about French sensibility, it will suffice that you will remember this. Today in France and in Europe, there is a generation who thinks that anyone who places his hope in the human condition is mad, but that anyone who despairs of events is a coward. This generation refuses absolute explanations and the rule of political philosophies, but wishes to affirm men and women in their flesh and in their striving for liberty. This generation does not believe the achievement of universal happiness and satisfaction is possible, but it does believe in diminishing human sorrow. It is because the world, in its essence, unhappy, that we need to create some joy. Because the world is unjust we need to work towards justice. And because the world is absurd, we must provide it with all its meaning. In the end what does it all mean? It means that we must be modest in our thoughts and our actions, stand our ground and do our best work. It means that we must create communities and think outside parties and governments in order to foster dialogue across national borders. The members of these communities will affirm, by their lives and their words, that this world must cease to be the world of police, soldiers and money, and become the world of men and women, of fruitful work and thoughtful leisure. This is where I think we ought to direct our effort, our thinking, and if necessary, our sacrifice. The corruption of the ancient world began with the murder of Socrates, and we killed many of him in Europe over these few years. That is the sign. It is the sign that only socratic spirit of indulgence toward others and rigor toward one's self can truly threaten murderous civilization. It is the sign that only this frame of mind can repair the world. All other efforts, however admirable, that rely on power and domination can only mutilate men and women more grievously. This, in any case, is the modest revolution that we French and Europeans are experiencing now.

Perhaps you are surprised that a French writer on an official visit to America does not feel obligated to present you some idyllic portrait of his country and has made no effort thus far what is generally called propaganda. But perhaps, when you reflect on the issues I have raised it will seem obvious why. Propaganda, I suppose, is designed to provoke within people feelings that they don't possess. But the French people who have shared our experience ask neither to be pitied nor loved by decree. The only national problem of concern to them was not dependent on world opinion. For 5 years what mattered to us was to know if we could save our honour. That is, if we could preserve the right to speak for ourselves the day the war was over. We weren't looking to anyone else to grant us this right. We needed to grant it to ourselves. This was not easy. But in the end if we did give ourselves this right it is because we know, and we are the only ones who know, the true extent of our sacrifices. Yet we are not entitled to give lessons. We have only have the right to escape the humiliating silence of those who were beaten and vanquished because they disdained humankind for too long. Beyond this, I ask you to believe that we will know how to keep our place. Perhaps, as some have said, there is indeed a chance that the history of the next 50 years will be made in part by nations other than France. I have no personal opinion on this question. I know only that our nation, which lost 1,620,000 a quarter century ago, and which has just lost several hundred thousands more volunteers must recognized that it has exhausted, or allowed others to exhaust, its strength. That is a fact. And the opinion of the world, its consideration or disdain, cannot change that fact. That is why it would seem to me

ludicrous to solicit or try to affect it. But it does not seem ludicrous to me to underline how the present world crisis stems from these quarrels about presidents and power. To summarize this evening and speaking now for myself, I would like to say just this: whenever we judge France, or any other country, or any matter, in terms of power, we are aiding and abetting a conception of man that leads inevitably to his mutilation. We are reinforcing the thirst for domination and we are headed towards the sanctioning of murder. What goes for the world of action goes for ideas. And those who say or write that the end justifies the means, those who say and write that greatness is measured by force, they are absolutely responsible for the atrocious accumulation of crimes disfiguring contemporary Europe.

I think I have expressed everything I felt duty bound to tell you. My duty was to remain faithful to the voices and the experiences of our European comrades so that you not be tempted to be judge them out of hand, for they sit and judge men over no one. No one, that is, except the murderers. And they regard all nations with the hope and certitudes that each are capable of finding the human truth that each contains. Speaking in particular to the young Americans in the audience this evening, I can say that the people I have spoken about have great respect for your humanity and your taste for freedom and happiness, which can be discerned among the faces of great Americans. Yes, they expect from you what they expect of all men of goodwill: a loyal contribution to the spirit of dialogue that they want to infuse the world with. Our struggles, our hopes, and our demands seen from afar may appear confused or futile to you. And it is true that on the road to wisdom and truth, if there is one, these men have not chosen the straightest or the simplest path. This is because neither the world nor history have offered them anything straightforward or simple. They are trying to forge with their own hand the secret they could not find in their given condition. And perhaps they will fail. But I am convinced that if they fail, so will the world. In a Europe still poisoned by violence and deep seated hatred, in a world torn apart by terror, they try to save for mankind what can still be saved. And that is their only ambition. If such an effort can find some expression in France, and if this evening I have been able to give you a faint idea of the passion for justice that inspires all French people, it will be our sole consolation, and my humblest source of pride.

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