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NORMANDY — JUNE 6, 1944

D-Day a reminder of U.S.-French friendship

BY SERGE BELLANGER

As the anniversary of the D-Day landing on June 6, 1944, is commemorated this year, the observances will take on special meaning in several ways. This is the 60th anniversary of one of the greatest military operations in history, and the ceremonies will honor a group whose numbers are now beginning to decline rapidly because of the passage of time. In addition, this celebration comes at a moment when the long and intense relationship between France and the United States is emerging from a wrenching experience, one that has opened significant rifts between these allies.

The Allied landing on the beaches of Normandy represented a high point in the history of international alliances. This year the United States and France will remember this event with a unique and dramatic tribute in which 100 U.S. veterans of the D-Day landing will be inducted into the French Legion of Honor, an order created by Napoleon in 1804 and embodying the highest distinction awarded in France. This will be a



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central part of a series of events in Paris and Normandy that will involve French President Jacques Chirac and President Bush as well as other heads of state.

The valiant soldiers being honored were youths in 1944, but now they are old. This may be the last time that many might be able to travel to France to revisit the site of their triumph. The 100 veterans to be honored will inevitably think about their comrades in arms who did not survive D-Day as well as those who have been lost more recently to the inevitable ravages of time. As a result, the ceremonies will have a special poignancy.

Meanwhile, the observances will also have a special meaning this year because France and the United States have been passing through a period of significant disagreement over U.S. policy in Iraq. The differences of opinion have been widely discussed. What has been less widely discussed are the steps that both nations are taking to resolve their differences and revitalize their relationship.

French and U.S. leaders are working together closely to fight terrorism in a variety of settings, from Afghanistan to Africa to Haiti. France and the United States are sharing information, exchanging ideas, pooling

resources and cooperating in a variety of undertakings.

This is a crucial step in reinforcing the linkages between France and the United States. It is worth remembering that this alliance dates back some 225 years, predating the formation of the United States, and it has endured many tests over time. Again and again, each nation has come to the aid of the other in a time of need. From the Marquis de Lafayette to Gen. "Black Jack" Pershing, from the revolutionary war battles in New England to the beaches of Normandy, French and American people have expressed the highest form of alliance — the willingness to commit their lives in support of one another.

This alliance has been an example for other nations in the world. The achievements of this alliance are testimony to the merits of joint efforts and partnerships.

Recent events in Iraq have caused that message to be muted but not silenced. But both nations must move forward. The way to revive and restore this alliance is not for each side to continue insisting on its position in this dispute but to seek out areas of agreement and work together to expand them.

There are encouraging signs that this process is well underway. At the

diplomatic level, the two countries are finding common cause on many fronts. At the popular level, meanwhile, the taunts and jokes, the complaints and threats are declining. Public-opinion polls show that people in the United States and France are returning to more-positive images of one another. The long arm of history is reaching across the chasm created by recent disputes to build a bridge — one that both sides must welcome.

D-Day is precisely the right reminder of what nations can achieve when they join forces. It is a testimony to alliances and mutual assistance. As this event is commemorated this year, nothing should take away from the honors to be bestowed on the 100 veterans chosen to represent the heroism displayed on that day. And nothing should detract from the focus on those who made the ultimate sacrifice for their countries. But as we reflect on their achievements and their losses, their bravery and selflessness, we also should reflect on the value and benefits that emanate from strong ties between nations. This kind of partnership is the surest way to create and maintain peace.

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