Living inside the Beltway where politics and diplomacy take center stage on a daily basis, it’s easy to forget that the city of Washington, D.C. has strong ties to France. Designed in 1791 by established French architect Pierre L’Enfant, the nation’s capital is a modern city with European flair—the wide, radiating boulevards bring Paris to mind. Small traces of France can be found everywhere in the United States, whether it’s the names of famous allies such as Lafayette or Rochambeau or Mardi Gras parades celebrating the French heritage of cities such as New Orleans, as we saw this past month. In February, such reminders of the strength of French-American relations were abundant throughout the U.S., particularly in business, technology and culture.

During the first week of February, the minister of culture made a trip to America to promote cinema and television, a vital industry in France. Now more than ever, French productions are garnering much attention in the United States and beyond. The government recently increased the tax rebate for foreign productions from 20% to 30%, a step that the French delegation discussed with several representatives from the film industry in Los Angeles, and which we hope will encourage more companies to film in France. French television shows have gained a strong following in the U.S. thanks to partnerships between French and American television companies. And at the end of February, the French film Mustang was among five nominees up for Best Foreign Film at the Academy Awards.

In Boston, French and American researchers gathered for French-American Innovation Day on February 9 and 10, an annual event focusing on evolving topics in research. This year the event focused on precision medicine, and the ways in which new technologies may transform clinical research. I had the privilege of opening this conference, which welcomed academics, technology and healthcare professionals as well as government stakeholders.

In the coming weeks, keep your eyes open for everyday reminders of France. From initiatives in culture, science and technology to celebrations of our country’s heritage, we will always enjoy close friendship and cooperation with the U.S.
Jean-Marc Ayrault named French minister of foreign affairs

ON FEBRUARY 11, French President François Hollande appointed former Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault as France’s minister of foreign affairs and international development. Ayrault will now oversee France’s diplomatic relations with countries throughout the world as the top official at the Quai d’Orsay, home to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Laurent Fabius, who served as minister of foreign affairs from 2012 until this past month, is awaiting the French parliament’s confirmation to become president of the Conseil constitutionnel, the institution that rules on the constitutional legitimacy of laws.

Ayrault has a wealth of previous experience in government affairs. He served as prime minister of France from 2012-2014 under President Hollande’s administration. Before serving as prime minister, he was the mayor of Nantes for over twenty years and a member of Parliament representing the Loire-Atlantique department in the National Assembly. The new foreign minister is a fluent German speaker, and holds a Bachelor’s degree and teaching certificate in the language, which will prove essential to French-German cooperation in Europe.

Of his new role, Ayrault said that he was honored to serve as the head of French diplomacy, working closely with Minister of State for European Affairs Harlem Désir; Minister of State for Foreign Trade, the Promotion of Tourism and French Nationals Abroad Matthias Fekl and Minister of State for Development and Francophonie Andre Vallini, as well as all the teams at the Quai d’Orsay.

Minister of Foreign Affairs Laurent Fabius and his successor Jean-Marc Ayrault at a ceremony at the Quai d’Orsay, surrounded by their partners, Marie-France Marchand-Baylet and Brigitte Ayrault.

Paris unveils its logo for 2024 Olympic bid

ON THE EVENING OF FEBRUARY 9, the city of Paris unveiled the official logo for its candidacy to host the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The multi-colored logo, which incorporates the shapes of both the Eiffel Tower and the number twenty-four, was projected on the Arc de Triomphe.

The French capital is competing against Los Angeles, Rome and Budapest to host the games. The last time the city hosted the Olympics was in 1924, so if the International Olympic Committee chooses Paris, it will mark exactly a century since the capital hosted the event. The Olympic Committee will vote on the matter in September 2017, and the winning city will be announced in Lima, Peru.

France has hosted many other international sporting events in the past. This June and July, the country will host the UEFA EURO 2016 championship, a pan-European soccer tournament that is one of the world’s largest sporting events. In 2017, France will host the World Handball Championship, followed by the Ryder Cup, a golf tournament, in 2018.

The motto of the Paris 2024 candidacy is “On rêve des jeux” (“We dream of the games”), conveying the hope of many that this dream may be realized.

An infographic detailing Olympic logos in France throughout the years. Paris is not the only city in which France has hosted this international sporting competition. Other cities include Chamonix, Grenoble and Albertville.
Pierre Comizzoli, 
research veterinarian 
at the Smithsonian 
National Zoo

When Pierre Comizzoli first arrived from France to work at the Smithsonian National Zoo in 2002, he didn’t know exactly what animals he would be working with. A specialist in animal fertility, Comizzoli had conducted research around the world, in areas such as French Guyana and Africa. Prior to coming to Washington, D.C., he worked on the conservation of ungulate species for the National Museum of Natural History in Paris. In the nation’s capital, some of his most significant work has been on the fertility of the giant pandas—the zoo has several, and they began significant research on the animals when Comizzoli arrived. He spoke with News From France about his work, the importance of giant panda conservation, the arrival of the zoo’s newest cub and the relationship that the Smithsonian shares with China in these efforts.

Can you talk about the process behind panda breeding and conservation?
The giant panda is really interesting because it has a short breeding season that only happens once a year, and you don’t want to miss it. That’s why we have to develop a lot of different tools that tell us exactly when to act to ensure that the male and the female are going to be able to produce a new baby.

For many years, we’ve tried to put pandas together for natural breeding, but after several attempts, usually they get frustrated, and they get a little bit aggressive with each other. To make sure that we are able to produce a baby, we always do artificial insemination. This is what we did for Bao Bao in 2013, and then again for Bei Bei (the newest panda cub) in 2015.

There are not many panda conservation programs in the United States. The other zoos that have giant pandas are in San Diego, Memphis and Atlanta. The rarity of these animals makes them very popular—they are extremely iconic and charismatic, and they are only found in central China. Their habitat is extremely rich in terms of biodiversity. By preserving the giant pandas, we are also preserving a whole ecosystem.

What is the nature of the relationship shared by the United States and China in these conservation efforts?
While the animals belong to China, they are lent to different institutions all across the world. When they produce a panda cub, the animal has to go back to China to be part of the breeding program over there after several years. This is a big diplomatic opportunity for China to have a really strong relationship with other countries in the fields of science and technology.

So the next in line at the Smithsonian Zoo is Bao Bao, the female who was born in 2013. When she’s the age of four, she will go back to China. And then of course Bei Bei at some point will also go back to China.

We have a lot of scientific relationships with colleagues in the other North American zoos, especially when it comes to giant pandas. But we also have Chinese colleagues that come here on a regular basis, and we go to China to work with them on subjects such as reproduction, behavior, nutrition and ecology.

Is Bei Bei ready to make his public debut?
Bei Bei is almost five months old now. This period is really important because pandas are extremely fragile when they are born. Now, Bei Bei is at an age where he’s still with his mother but able to feed himself with other types of food. This is a good time for him to be presented to the public.

It’s a huge opportunity for our communication and outreach teams to showcase Bei Bei to the public in Washington, D.C. It allows visitors to understand all the work that’s been done to produce that baby and of course it’s a huge opportunity for us to promote all the science behind giant panda conservation. The diplomacy aspect is also important—it’s science for diplomacy and diplomacy for science. The giant panda is a great example of this.
Cinema has been an indelible part of French culture ever since its birth with the production of the Lumière brothers’ L’arrivée d’un train à la gare de la Ciotat (The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station), one of the oldest films in the world, in 1896. While more than a hundred years have passed since French filmmakers such as Auguste and Louis Lumière and Georges Méliès brought cinema to the masses, today the country’s industry is more innovative than ever. In 2015, both French movies and television series achieved great international success, particularly in the United States. The country’s minister of culture and communication was in Los Angeles to talk about new government initiatives to promote French cinema internationally last month.

Success of French films abroad
French films have long been positively received by international audiences. Movies by French directors and production companies are regularly screened in American theaters, and every once in a while they are exceptionally popular—one example is the widely praised Les Intouchables starring François Cluzet and Omar Sy, which pulled in more than $10 million in the United States alone following its release in 2011.

The popularity of French films continues to evolve throughout the world. In 2015, ticket sales for films made in French rose by 22% compared with 2014, accounting for 42.6 million worldwide. American theaters accounted for 14.6% of total ticket sales for French films, with 15.4 million sold in the U.S.

For some of the most successful films, the French connection is not immediately evident—Taken 3, for example, was shot in English, but produced by mostly French companies, including EuropaCorp, Canal+ and Ciné+. The film was the most popular French production at international box offices in 2015, with 43.6 million tickets sold worldwide. The Little Prince, an adaptation of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s beloved classic, was the year’s second biggest hit, bringing in €62 million. It is the most successful French animation film on international screens in 20 years, and is sure to draw many American viewers when it opens in the U.S. on March 18.

French cinema receives continuous attention from international film critics, and the work of the country’s filmmakers and production companies is recognized at festivals throughout the world.

This year, Mustang, Deniz Gamze Ergüven’s coming-of-age tale about sisters growing up in northern Turkey, garnered nominations for Best Foreign Picture at both the Golden Globes and the Academy Awards.
The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences in Los Angeles has a long history of honoring French cinema. Since the debut of the Best Foreign Language Film category, France has received more nominations than any other country. Ten French actresses have been nominated for Best Actress in 16 films, including winners Claudette Colbert, Simone Signoret and Marion Cotillard. In the Best Actor category, four actors have been nominated for eight films. Jean Dujardin won this award most recently for his role in The Artist in 2011.

Television series
With the development of new user technologies over the past decade, the media landscape has changed, and viewers have embraced new ways to watch a wide range of shows available at their fingertips. This has also created opportunities for new partnerships between production and broadcasting companies, and a number of French television shows have now gained popularity in the U.S. thanks to such efforts.

Spiral (Engrenages), a crime series that was first released in 2005, won over American viewers after the first three seasons were made available on Netflix in the United States. Partnerships with American broadcasters also proved important for The Returned (Les Revenants), which was picked up by SundanceTV in 2013 and is now available to stream on Netflix. Set in the idyllic setting of the French Alps, the zombie series has been compared to The Walking Dead, and created much buzz among American audiences.

The success of such shows is the result of increased cooperation between French and American television producers and networks. As French producers grow more savvy about the international market, new projects are being developed to please audiences around the world. Last year, French company Mademoiselle Films signed a deal with the Mark Gordon company in L.A. to produce a new series called Haute Couture. On the other side of the Atlantic, organizations such as the Île-de-France Commission seek to bring more television companies to France, spearheading the development of new shows such as Versailles, an English-produced series filmed in Paris.

Government efforts
The respect and notoriety that French entertainment has gained over the years would not be possible without government-led efforts to protect the industry. France’s concept of "l’exception culturelle" ("the cultural exception"), recognizes the importance of the country’s cultural works and aims to protect them. Every branch of culture receives automatic subsidies from the government—for cinema, this comes from the National Center of Cinematography and the Moving Image, a branch of the Ministry of Culture and Communication that uses taxes from ticket sales to fund the production or distribution of French cinema and television.

Recently, the French government has taken measures to increase its attractiveness to producers by raising its tax rebates on international productions from 20 to 30 percent. The decision was lauded by many film industry professionals who said that it would boost the country's competitiveness on the international market. Olivier René Veillon, president of the Île-de-France Commission, said, "Until now we have been limited because of the lack of competitiveness of our tax scheme in comparison with other schemes such as that of the U.K….Now there will be much more extended shoots.”

In 2015, ticket sales for films made in French rose by 22% compared with 2014. —UniFrance study

Mark Gordon company in L.A. to produce a new series called Haute Couture. On the other side of the Atlantic, organizations such as the Île-de-France Commission seek to bring more television companies to France, spearheading the development of new shows such as Versailles, an English-produced series filmed in Paris.

Former Minister of Culture and Communication Fleur Pellerin visited Los Angeles in early February to promote this tax rebate and the close relationship shared by the American and French entertainment industries.

While in Los Angeles, Minister Pellerin also met with American film professionals and academics—notably Warner Brothers CEO Kevin Tsujihara and film director Chris Nolan—to discuss potential collaborations and share knowledge and expertise.

New successes in a new era
As French film and television executives seek ways to promote their work internationally, Americans have the opportunity to view more of the country's productions than ever before, whether it's in a traditional cinema setting or streaming comfortably from their iPads. With the government’s new efforts to attract film executives to the country, audiences are likely to see and hear much more of France, its language, actors and directors in the coming years.
On February 9, a new French wine tourism portal, www.visitfrenchwine.com, was officially launched. The site was unveiled by former Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius at a press conference at the Quai d'Orsay. Others officials at the conference included Florence Cathiard, president of the Higher Council for Wine Tourism, and Christian Mantei, managing director of Atout France, the country’s official tourism agency.

The new website showcases the importance of wine in French culture, and the strength of the wine industry. France continuously ranks as first or second in the world for wine production—the country produces over six billion bottles annually. When launching the site, French officials said they hoped it would strengthen wine’s importance as part of the country’s cultural heritage.

Visitfrenchwine.com offers travel information and ideas for eighteen different regions in France. The platform is extremely user-friendly, with a customized system to help travelers plan the perfect trip. The portal also features interviews with wine professionals, such as sommeliers, business executives and chefs, as well as a calendar of upcoming events.

Whether tourists are looking to enjoy a wine festival, take a small vineyard tour with friends or learn about the diverse regions of France, Visitfrenchwine.com has something for everyone. It’s just one of the French government’s many initiatives to promote tourism and culinary traditions—in June, a center of excellence devoted to wine tourism was opened in Champagne.

A busy month for Louisiana, with Mardi Gras celebrations and Ambassador Araud’s first official visit

Mardi Gras to America. One of the brothers founded Mobile, Alabama in 1702, which became the capital of French Louisiana—this is the city where the first Mardi Gras festivities in America were celebrated. New Orleans, however, is the city with the most revered festivities today.

Each year, Mardi Gras season kicks off with a salute to the state’s French heritage at the Jeanne d’Arc Parade. This January, French Consul General Grégor Trumel welcomed parade goers for the second year in a row with a toast from the balcony of The Historic New Orleans Collection. The Joan of Arc parade celebrates the life of its namesake French legend, and the consul general joined the panel this year to crown Joan the Maiden, a title that goes to a French-speaking, confident young woman.

Just a few weeks after the celebrations, Ambassador Gérard Araud paid his first official visit to Louisiana. The ambassador met officials including Mitch Landrieu, the mayor of New Orleans, and visited the Lycée Français of New Orleans to speak about immersion education. He also awarded the French National Order of Merit to Eric Belin and Kristie Holm, who are both active in the state’s French community.

Throughout all of his activities, the spirit binding Louisiana and France was strong. Whether during Mardi Gras celebrations or official diplomatic visits, the state is proud of its French heritage. When speaking with the public, Ambassador Araud stressed that these connections would not fade: “France was part of the past. France will be part of your future.”
French scientists contribute to breakthrough discovery on Einstein’s theory of relativity

Last fall, a group of international scientists heard and recorded the sounds of two black holes colliding more than a billion light years away, generating a rippling of gravitational waves that set off the monitors of scientists in both Europe and the United States. Over a century ago, Einstein came up with his theory of general relativity, in which he imagined gravity as a force that could stretch space and time. This thrilling discovery proves that what Einstein had theorized more 100 years ago is true.

Thierry Mandon, French minister for higher education and research, explained that international collaboration and cooperation were crucial to making this scientific breakthrough. LIGO, the U.S. gravitational wave observatory, and teams from the French-Italian equivalent, known as EGO–VIRGO, paired up on the project. They were the first to witness the presence of gravitational waves and thus the collision of two black holes as well.

When the waves were detected for the first time back on September 14, 2015, scientists could hardly believe the extraordinary results. After much verification, the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) announced the discovery on February 11.

That same day, in Washington, D.C., the National Science Foundation held a press conference where the breakthrough was celebrated. Seventy-five French scientists were involved in this project, and three of them were able to attend the conference—Matteo Barsuglia, Fabien Cavalier and Laurent Pinard.

Massachusetts hosts French-American Innovation Day

On February 9 and 10, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge, hosted French-American Innovation Day. This annual conference explores specific technological issues by bringing together French and American scientists, companies, entrepreneurs and investors. Each year, attendees exchange views on corporate initiatives, research opportunities, technological issues and business. FAID’s main objective is to facilitate and develop an innovative relationship between France and America.

The discussion topic for FAID 2016 was precision medicine and new technologies, and the role they play in transforming clinical research. The French Embassy’s Office for Science & Technology organized the event with MIT and the Global Care Initiative.

Ambassador Gérard Araud, who was in Boston that week to speak about a range of issues, opened the conference. Speakers came from a variety of French and American academic institutions and research centers including INSERM (the French Institute for Medical Research), the Pasteur Institute, the Johnson and Johnson Innovation Center and the Boston University School of Medicine.

Over two days, representatives from these organizations spoke about how innovative developments like medical imaging and big data are changing the nature of research in areas such as cancer, oncology and antimicrobial resistance. There was a strong focus on strategies for scientific entrepreneurs and businesses seeking to receive funding for R&D projects or looking to expand their companies in a new era of innovation. FAID 2016 was powered by a spirit of optimism, as many institutions have made exciting developments in their research with the help of these new technologies.
Chamonix-Mont-Blanc is one of the world’s most popular ski destinations, as well as one of the oldest ski resorts in France. With an altitude of 15,781 feet, Mont Blanc—nicknamed the “Roof of Europe”—is the highest mountain peak of the Alps.

Chamonix’s reputation as a premier ski destination was solidified in 1924 when it hosted the first Winter Olympic Games. Numerous ski lifts were built in the following years to advance and expand the resort. The village also has a key transportation link with Italy, the Mont Blanc tunnel.

Drawing tourists from all over the world, Chamonix-Mont-Blanc is famous as more than a great ski venue. Toward the top of the mountain range lie the blue waters of the White Lake, located in the Aiguille Rouge nature reserve. There is also an expansive network of hiking trails, including one that crosses through France, Switzerland and Italy and can be completed in seven to 10 days. The breathtaking views provide for gorgeous hikes year round.

Chamonix-Mont-Blanc is also a great destination for families. There are several museums, such as the Maison des Jeunes et de la Culture, that look at the cultural history of the commune. Visitors to the resort can explore the area on guided walks, and ride on the small train that crosses the town.