

## Extemporaneous Speaking at NFL Nationals

By

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The National Forensic League annual tournament is the largest, most prestigious, and most competitive high school speech and debate contest, as well as one of the greatest exhibitions of oratorical talent in the English-speaking world. About two hundred competitors from across the country enter in one of the nine main events, and an epic sequence of elimination rounds over the course of an entire week determines the chosen few who shall perform in front of a sizable audience. No other forensics tournament, the gilded podiums of the national circuit included, attracts the same measure of talent or bestows the same glory on its victors. This year's tournament will be held June 14-19 in Birmingham, Alabama.

Nationals is the hardest tournament, and this article is concerned specifically with the hardest event, Extemporaneous Speaking. I write on the assumption that the reader is familiar with the format and terminology of extemp, and therefore we may concentrate our attention upon what is unique to the Nationals experience. Categorization being prominent among the skills of extempers, past or present, I shall divide my composition into two main parts, the first providing a chronological guide to the ins and outs of the tournament, and the second disclosing a somewhat secret formula for constructing speeches based on the Nationals topic areas.

### Part 1: The Story of Extemp at Nationals

Unlike even the grand tournaments of the national circuit, NFL Nationals, in the manner of the Olympics, is not geographically fixed, which helps discourage the ascendancy of any particular group. The policy also showcases the size and diversity of the NFL. But for our purposes, it necessitates the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, especially given that local staff are often unprepared for the logistical challenges of so large a pool. I would note that in the current case, it could be frightfully hot in Birmingham, as it was for me in Oklahoma City, and I shall therefore supplement the parental admonition to avoid the heat and to imbibe sufficient fluids.

Yet the schedule is fixed even if the geography is not, and therein lies our principal concern. Nationals will officially begin on **Sunday**, June 14. In addition to some inane entertainments, they will hold some sort of orientation, and it will be imperative to collect several items either from the source or from your coach. Most important of all is the ribbon that shall designate you as a competitor and the code that shall as one in particular. Be sure also to grab a campus map, as they do not distribute any copies in the prep room. The second task may prove impossible, given access issues, but it would be highly advantageous to, map in hand, scope out the locale on Sunday before competition begins, as there shall be no opportunity the

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following day. I would identify the prep room, your first three speaking rooms, and a clean restroom. The six preliminary rounds in both extemps will take place at Oak Mountain High School,<sup>2</sup> and both versions of extemp follow precisely the same schedule.

It shall be imperative to retire early that evening. At the time of this writing, the schedules were not publicly available, but competition generally runs upon a morning and an afternoon shift, with extemp held in the morning. The first speaker traditionally begins *speaking* at eight o'clock, which means that draw commences at a grueling half past seven. Tracking back the time generally required to dress professionally, to eat a complete breakfast, to commute, and to scan the morning's paper prior to draw would necessitate a wake-up of about half past five in the morning. Given that optimal performance, both physical and mental, is said to depend upon at least nine hours of sleep, we compute an extemp bedtime of eight in the evening, an unusually early hour which you might attempt two or three days in advance, in order to allow your body to adjust.

Thus competition shall begin bright and early **Monday** morning, and I can guarantee that many of your opponents shall be deprived of half the rest they require. The tournament may or may not have permitted the extempers to position their tubs on Sunday; but regardless, you are certain to see a very large number of your colleagues scurrying about. There are short of two hundred extempers in each of the two categories; and if one prep room contains them both, as it sometimes does, there will be nearly four hundred people in the room.

But our concern lies less with the size of the competition pool as with the singular rigor of the draw procedures. Nationals is the strictest tournament with regard to enforcement of the official rules, and even the most seasoned competitors are susceptible to disqualification. No electronic devices of any form may be consulted during draw. No competitor may enter or leave the room during draw. Unnecessary conversation is prohibited.<sup>3</sup> Random searches of files are a common occurrence, and the prep room officers have an exceptional nose for illegal material. Food and drink are permitted though, as usual. Nationals also employs an exit procedure entirely its own. Extempers cannot report to their speaking rooms until they have formed an orderly line inside the door and have registered their codes and questions with the exit officer. He will also require them, if they have not already done so, to dispose of their prep notes in the wastebasket by which he stands, as no notes may leave the prep room.

This severity can also apply to judging. There are two judges in the preliminary rounds, but the geographical diversity of the pool demands that competitors abandon any assumptions about judge behavior on which they may have come to rely; and two strike me as paramount. First, speakers should not take *any* grace period for granted. Although you might hail from a district that allows speeches to run fifteen or thirty seconds overtime, you must not assume that either of the judges does; and therefore it is absolutely essential to not exceed seven minutes. Second, it is more important than usual to establish how time signals will be issued. My favorite phrase was, "How will time signals be given?" Putting it this way assumes that they will be, but allows the judges, whom one of course is seeking to satisfy, to establish the parameters.

One final note, concerning the questions at Nationals, should be added at this point. I will address the topic areas in the second half of this essay, but the questions themselves may

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<sup>2</sup> See index 1 for a schematic of the dates, locations, and elimination rounds of competition.

<sup>3</sup> If the reader suspects the viability of such a rule, he is invited to consider that a chattering colleague of mine in International Extemp, during the preliminary period, was sternly warned that further babble would result in disqualification. He placed second overall.

appear somewhat different from what many competitors, especially those who frequent the national circuit, are accustomed to. They tend to be rather general. International extempers might encounter the following: “What can the West do to help Africa?” Domestic extempers might face something like this: “Will Obama significantly improve education?” This generic aspect partially results from the questions NOT being particularly time sensitive. They are composed by a single tournament individual in March, and therefore do not take into account the most recent developments. It is of some use to know that the questions one will be answering were written three months previously.

There will be three rounds both Monday and **Tuesday**, for a total of six preliminary bouts. The first breaks shall be announced Tuesday evening. Some prominent location on campus shall be selected for the purpose, and large flipcharts, dramatically unrolled, shall list the codes of the sixty extempers, in each category, who shall advance to elimination rounds seven and eight. Therefore in order to make the first cut, an extemper must place in roughly the top third of the pile. Yet the scores are erased at this point: all those who advance to round seven begin again at zero, and thenceforward the records are cumulative, with each ballot counting equally.

**Wednesday** shall be in some respects the longest. The remaining competitors shall be guaranteed rounds seven and eight, in which the number of judges increases to three. Then shortly after noon, I should think, they will announce, in the same flipchart fashion, the thirty domestic extempers and the thirty international extempers who shall advance to the quarterfinal rounds, nine and ten. These will be held at Spain Park High School several miles away; and although the event planners have their reasons for relocating extemp draw *in the middle* of the day, it can seem absurd from a competitor’s viewpoint. Round nine will take place that afternoon at Spain Park but round ten will be reserved for the next morning, the only point in the tournament at which a break is distributed over more than one day.

**Thursday** is the day when Nationals is really won or lost. Round ten will occur that morning, and after a longer pause than usual they will announce the top fourteen extempers, in each division, who will advance to the two semifinal rounds. There will be seven speakers per panel, and semifinalists should expect a full room in attendance. Victory, we all recognize, does not generally depend upon a perverse mastery of tournament procedures; but I will record one important fact about semifinals: the number of ballots. Semifinal rounds have five judges, and the total of ten ballots acquired from the two rounds is three more than the seven from the Final on Friday. Thus extempers who perform exceptionally well in the semis but only moderately so in the Final—and I belonged to this category—may still expect to retain their overall position.

**Friday** ushers in the Final Round, the dramatic and unique conclusion to the week’s contests. Stretched across the entire day are the Finals of most events, along with the unforgettable awards ceremony that evening. Speech and debate competitors are accustomed to the unexpected: carefully laid plans often go awry or encounter unforeseen obstacles. But Finals takes this law to the extreme. Those who prevail to the round should be prepared for anything, given that speaking in an auditorium containing hundreds of people is fundamentally unlike anything else. I recall that one year, dazzled by the spotlights, I could not read the time cards, nor did I know where to proceed after delivering my speech. I hence wandered aimlessly around backstage. Thus I warn the chosen few who break to the Final Round to be prepared, more than ever before, to adapt to changing circumstances; and I shall now proceed to discuss what *can* be known with certainty about Finals.

First, there will be six competitors, and each receives a handsome trophy for his efforts. Modest scholarship money is also in play. The round will be open to the public in a large auditorium with an intimate prep room backstage. Those who script the event are familiar with the block format of extemp speeches, and hence position at least two microphones on stage to allow the competitors to walk between main points. Seated front and center should be the timekeeper, who will employ cards rather than the usual fingers. The nine judges should also be seated nearby, and one must not forget to speak to them more than to the huge audience. They each provide a single ballot, with the high and the low ranks dropped prior to the final tally.

But the most unique feature of Finals is cross-examination, and we should pause to consider the implications of this custom. Extemp is the only NFL event which substantially alters its procedure for the Final Round, and a finalist is naturally anxious about an aspect of competition which he could not have practiced, in an official capacity, more than a handful of times. After an extemper concludes his speech, the previous panelist reappears onstage and is allowed to question him for two minutes.<sup>4</sup> Despite the apparent drama and intensity of allowing two extempers to cross swords, there is a general consensus, among almost all who have been through it, that cross-examination contributes little to the overall outcome, that it seldom serves as a means of either victory or defeat. Its effect upon most competitors seems marginal. But there can be no doubt that it does provide an opportunity to take an opponent down a notch, if not to cripple him entirely, and therefore I might provide some general advice to the questioner and to the speaker.

It appears to me that the objective of the questioner should be to uncover, gently but firmly, a flaw in the speaker's analysis, something he has failed to consider or has conceived inappropriately. *Inside Washington* or other TV programs in which panelists spar about politics might be taken as a model. Thus one should listen to the speaker's argument carefully, and as it unfolds consider not so much the details as the overall framework. During Finals my junior year, the young lady whom I had to question was making an argument about how Iran, Iraq, and North Korea constitute an Axis of Evil; yet while she clearly established their malevolence and general antipathy to the West, she said little to nothing about any *united* criminality, and I called her on it. Occasionally, one might discover not merely a chink in the armor but a gaping hole. I recall an MBA Round Robin in which one poor fool had expounded upon what we should do *if* OPEC were to reduce oil prices. His questioner, armed with up to the minute information, then rose and observed that OPEC did in fact lower oil prices.

The speaker's task is obviously to defend, and I conceive three general ways of doing so. First, in answer to a challenge, one might allude to the speech just given, reinforcing concepts already presented. This tactic conveys the impression that you already considered the questioner's point, whatever it may be. Second, one can present new material. If your speech was principally about NATO, yet your opponent introduces European defense or current debates at the Pentagon, you can meet him on his own turf and demonstrate your knowledge of these issues as well. Finally, one might resort to the science of fielding questions that has been perfected by politicians. These rhetorical twists take the sting out of questions and restate them in a more flattering light. For instance, if someone posits, "Why would you ever support Dick Cheney's position on water-boarding? That's wrong and totally un-American.", you might respond by saying, smoothly and elegantly, "Interrogation methods occupy an important place in contemporary homeland security, and therefore..." Skills in fielding questions are utilized particularly when polarizing issues are on the table.

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<sup>4</sup> The first speaker is questioned by the sixth speaker, who then returns to the prep room.

I will introduce one last remark about NFL Extemp Finals. We all affirm the dishonesty of plagiarism, and are in agreement that it violates the spirit, if not the letter, of extemp to make up sources; but nevertheless we have all been forced to improvise somewhat when a date or particular newspaper citation slips the mind. I am uncertain whether or not they check sources during Finals: they certainly don't for any of the other rounds. I have heard testimony both ways. But it is abundantly clear that no trophy will be withheld because of one or two flubbed sources. My advice therefore is to not dwell upon the matter either way. Finalists should simply do their best, take what comes, and display their proven skills.

## Part 2: Victory in Extemp at Nationals

We thus conclude our chronological discussion of extemp at Nationals, and the second half of our task is to address what is obviously the heart of competition: the speeches. The reader is acquainted with the elements of a successful speech: fluency, intelligence, reasonableness, humor, and charm. These qualities are universal and we may step over them. But there is truly a secret, a key, a magic wand to delivering winning speeches at Nationals. Concealed in broad daylight, it is ignored by almost everyone; yet recognition of the fact can make an indescribable difference in the level at which one performs. This pillar of cloud which shall lead you home, this flaming sword which shall drive your opponents from the field, is that the NFL publicly announces, weeks before the tournament, all of the extemp topic areas.

Extempers generally give little thought to the topic areas of a particular round. In most cases, tournaments simply alternate between domestic and international. Large circuit tournaments do have themes for particular rounds, but extempers never know them *in advance*: the announcement is usually made right before draw begins. But the NFL publishes, in the *Rostrum* and online, all its topic areas weeks prior to Nationals,<sup>5</sup> and a tremendous amount of strategy can be built upon this knowledge. Specifically, one may construct, in advance of the tournament, speech skeletons or outlines that correspond to each of the topic areas, outlines broad enough to pertain to any particular question within one, but narrow enough to exclude any question outside it.

The reader is aware of the attention-getters, jokes, and philosophic quotations artistically distributed throughout a winning speech, and I propose to do two things to this raw material. First, all of it shall become germane to a particular topic area. Second, I propose to arrange these elements in an outline before the first shot is fired at Nationals, allowing an extemper, *upon selecting the question*, to have nearly one-third of the speech prepared and practiced in advance.

Let us take for example the first topic area on the list for international, "Western and Eastern Europe." I know from my long study of the continent that these two halves of Europe generally confront a different set of challenges, and I shall therefore decide to compose one speech skeleton for Western and another for Eastern Europe. My Western European outline shall be able to accommodate a question about any country west of Vienna or about the European Union as a whole. As we are all aware, a great speech begins with a great introduction.

The introduction, like all the artistic elements I shall present, must be topic-specific,<sup>6</sup> must be entirely of my own composition, and should preferably not have been used before. The

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<sup>5</sup> See index 2.

introduction, or more precisely the attention-getter portion thereof, will also set the artistic foundation for the entire speech. Jane Austen's novels have recently been made into several motion pictures and are enjoying a surge in popularity; therefore I will select one of her stories and compose something like this:

In Jane Austen's romance novel *Persuasion*, the humble Anne Elliot yields to social convention and breaks off her engagement to the penniless Frederick Wentworth. Anne never stopped loving the naval officer, but in the meantime her cousin William Elliot offers her his hand. He is handsome, wealthy, and has nice manners; but behind the scenes he is scheming to inherit the family title and take a friend of Sir Elliot for his mistress. Like William Elliot, Western Europe as a whole has long been characterized as having a glittering veneer but a decaying inside, and we see this principle in...

We note the usual features of a good introduction, such as brevity, succinctness, and relevance; but, as we shall see, this one will establish a unified artistic foundation for the remainder of the performance. Note that the last clause transitions into whatever the topic, at all related to Western Europe, may be.

Extempers of intermediate skill are generally able to execute a topic-specific introduction, but in order to improve one must learn to integrate artistic material into the two or three main points of the speech, and to do so in a relaxed, natural way. Following my model, we shall compose original, topic-specific jokes, quotations, and references to the introduction and distribute them beforehand in a speech outline,<sup>7</sup> which shall then serve as guidepost for the analysis. Focusing on composition first, I need at least one, but preferably two, innocent bits of humor about Western Europeans. Perhaps the following shall suffice: "Yet in the European world of...actions are often involuntary. One visiting dignitary recalled that King Edward VII, at a royal banquet, let forth a quote 'colonic trumpet involuntary'. That's King's English for 'fart.' But one issue that should be trumpeted is..." Note how the line, as ridiculous as it may be, includes an entrance, a climax, and a transition to the next point. We shall employ the same formula for a philosophic quotation, and any name from Western Europe is fair game. The following is an example: "But with regard to...issue, the Europeans are best off teaching themselves, for as Victorian novelist William Thackeray stated, 'What instruction is more effectual than self-instruction?' It shall also be effectual to consider..." The reader begins to discern how total immersion in the topic area creates a unified artistic effect. Finally, the speaker should allude to the introduction at least once in the body of the speech. The following would work: "Miss Austen's novels have long been criticized for ignoring the dangers and complexities of life, and it is certainly true that...is not to be found in them."

Finally, of course, we have the conclusion. This is the easiest part of the speech to execute because it is the most formulaic. First, one recites the topic question and the main points. Second, one returns to the attention-getter. This allusion to the beginning may be quite brief, and I was always fond of attaching a topic-specific quote at the *very* end in order to finish on a particularly strong note. The combined devices look like this: "We can only wish that the

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<sup>6</sup> This means, more or less, that the artistic material chosen derives from the region of the world or the culture under consideration. Allow instinct to serve as your guide in this matter. In the example chosen, Jane Austen is directly associated with Western Europe. Domestic extempers, for their part, may not deal in particular regions, but they are well-versed in their topics and can usually discern their natural extent.

<sup>7</sup> See index 3 for a sample speech employing the artistic devices here presented.

Europeans involved will approach this issue with Austenian discretion, for as Samuel Richardson wrote in *Pamela*, “Things that we wish, are apt to gain a too ready credence with us.”

I have thus explained how these artistic devices are composed, but have yet to speak of their arrangement. For my last Nationals competition as a senior, I composed twenty-three separate skeletons for the IX topic areas and placed the devices in the same position for each one. At the end of my first main point, for instance, I would let loose a topic-specific joke, and would then allude to my attention-getter at the beginning of my second main point. Thus upon drawing a question, I had not only about two of the seven minutes of my speech entirely memorized, but also I knew the exact positions of my artistic devices, and could easily fit the standard analysis around them. Most extempers wrap their jokes and quotes around their analysis, but I contend that one should do the reverse given that the former can be prepared in advance. It becomes much easier to prep winning speeches with a foundation or scaffolding already in place.

As I conclude this presentation of my particular methods, there are bound to be readers who see in them an unethical, if not perhaps an unsophisticated, attempt to “can” speeches. There have always been extempers who maintain that pre-written, pre-practiced artistic material should not find its way into tournament speeches. Having a few ideas for intros or even a few favorite quotations in one’s head is one thing, goes this argument, but memorizing any amount of material beforehand violates the spirit of extemp. The prime motive behind the anti-canning position, to insist upon fresh, original, topic-centered speeches, is commendable; but the argument that composition and memorization *per se* endanger these qualities is a fatalistic delusion. In the first place, I have instructed extempers to compose material that shall be *entirely* their own. All of the two dozen introductions I wrote for my senior year at Nationals derived solely from my personal pen: not a word of them came from a briefing book or a debate camp. I was the sole author of all my speech outlines. Second, everything I used was genuinely topic-specific. It did not merely *appear* to be; it actually was. When speaking about Africa, I would tell a joke about *The Lion King*. When analyzing social problems in Russia, I would quote Tolstoy. For my introduction about the Middle East, I used an anecdote about Abraham smashing some pagan idols. Had I attached an intro about *Star Wars* to tensions between India and Pakistan, I would have certainly crossed the canning threshold. But all my material remained as grounded in the topic area as anything one could conceive during prep time. Third, some consideration should be given to the *extent* of memorization for which I argue. An extemper following my methods shall probably be forced to compose at least twenty outlines that each contains about two minutes of artistic material. He is thus going to memorize between forty and forty-five minutes of introductions, conclusions, jokes, quotations, and references to the introduction. That is not “canning,” rather it is committing to memory, in an entirely honorable fashion, a huge repository of knowledge which shall enhance the quality of the speeches. Against this amount of preparation, an extemper who insists that nothing should be memorized prior to the tournament almost appears lazy by comparison. Memorization and prior practice may go against the spirit of improvisational, but not of extemporaneous speaking; and in the midst of a war in which the fortress is the mind, I merely teach how to ensure that it remains well provisioned.

We close this discussion of Extemporaneous Speaking at NFL Nationals. I have described how the frantic, exhausting, but marvelous week shall unfold, and have disclosed the formula I employed to great effect, narrowly missing the national championship my senior year. I congratulate all this year’s qualifiers, and encourage those who narrowly missed to attempt again next year so singular an odyssey of the mind. I think I sway not too far to the fantastic

when I say that in standing shoulder to shoulder with the greatest minds of your generation, in taking the stage of Extemporaneous Speaking, the hardest speech and debate event of the most powerful nation on Earth, you will be drawn to a vague and distant sense of the divine, your affections transported to regions of no common air.



**INDEX 1**Extemp Schedule:

Monday, 15 June, Oak Mountain HS

Round 1

Round 2

Round 3

Tuesday, 16 June, Oak Mountain HS

Round 4

Round 5

Round 6

*BREAK*, to the top 60

Wednesday, 17 June, Oak Mountain HS

Round 7

Round 8

*BREAK*, to the top 30

Round 9, Spain Park HS

Thursday, 18 June, Spain Park HS

Round 10

*BREAK*, to the top 14

Round 11

Round 12

*BREAK*, to the top 6

Friday, 19 June, Birmingham-Jefferson Civic Center

Finals

## INDEX 2

### Nationals Extemp Topic Areas, 2009

(They may even use them *in this order*; it was so done so in 2001, my junior year.)

#### **USX**

1. Education and Issues of Youth
2. America: Challenges and Opportunities
3. The American War on International Terrorism
4. Science, Technology, and the Environment
5. American Politics
6. Business and the Economy
7. U.S. Immigration Policy
8. Crime and Punishment
9. Issues Facing States and Cities
10. America: Sports, Media, and Pop Culture
11. The New President
12. Health and Welfare
13. National Defense and Homeland Security

#### **IX**

1. Western and Eastern Europe
2. Russia
3. Africa
4. The World: Challenges and Opportunities
5. China, Taiwan, Japan, and the Koreas
6. U.S. Foreign Policy: The Foreign Perspective
7. Central and South America
8. India, Pakistan, and SE Asia
9. The Problem of International Terrorism
10. The World Economy
11. Science, Technology, and the Environment
12. Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean
13. The Middle East

### INDEX 3

#### Sample Speech According to My Formula

(The bold type represents the outline, composed, arranged, and memorized prior to the tournament. Below I expand my Western Europe skeleton examined above.)

#### *Has Sarkozy been an effective French President?*

**In Jane Austen’s romance novel *Persuasion*, the humble Anne Elliot yields to social convention and breaks off her engagement to the penniless Frederick Wentworth. Anne never stopped loving the naval officer, but in the meantime her cousin William Elliot offers her his hand. He is handsome, wealthy, and has nice manners; but behind the scenes he is scheming to inherit the family title and take a friend of Sir Elliot for his mistress. Like William Elliot, Western Europe as a whole has long been characterized as having a glittering veneer but a decaying inside, and we see this principle in contemporary French politics.** The *New York Times* reported an historic change on May 26 of this year, in that France, under President Nicolas Sarkozy, has rejoined NATO, ending four decades of animosity toward the U.S. This event is of immense importance for American national security, and we should therefore pose the question, “Has Sarkozy been an effective French President?” The answer is that after two years in office the record is a mixed one, first because his foreign policy has achieved geostrategic successes; but second, his domestic record is like Louis XVI—there’s good and bad; but finally because his personal leadership has lost all power to persuade.

Let us first turn to the most immediate consideration, where we’ll see that President Sarkozy, elected in 2007, has achieved geostrategic successes in foreign policy. As Tony Judt notes in *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, France attempted to play both sides during the Cold War, pretentiously serving as a “balance” between the United States and the Soviet Union. Yet Sarkozy, though a conservative, is not a Gaullist, and under his leadership American and French bilateral relations have never been better. Yet he has won victories closer to home as well. President De Gaulle, though a leading power in Western Europe, was also something of a bully, but Sarkozy has managed to position the Fifth Republic at the forefront of the European renaissance. The April 2009 edition of the *Journal of Democracy* notes someone’s 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. That someone is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and Sarkozy has sent troops to Afghanistan to help fight the Taliban and to the Persian Gulf in order to protect oil shipping routes, with other European nations such as Germany following suit. During the Eisenhower administration, France and Britain were humiliated in the Suez Crisis, but the *Washington Post* reported on May 26 of this year that Sarkozy attended the opening ceremony of a French military base in Abu Dhabi, the first base to be constructed outside French soil since decolonization. Clearly the French President has inherited a little of Napoleon’s talent for foreign relations, but hopefully not Edward VII’s for bad manners. **One visiting dignitary recalls that, during a royal banquet, the king let loose a “colonic trumpet involuntary.” That’s King English for “fart.”**

**But we should also trumpet** my second area of analysis, that Sarkozy's domestic record is like Louis XVI—there's the good and the bad. **As a novelist, Jane Austen has long been accused of painting too rosy a picture of life**, and therefore she might not be the best writer to depict the progress of the Sarkozy domestic agenda. As the *Economist* magazine of Great Britain notes on May 28 of this year, his ideology roughly corresponds to that of our Republican Party: low taxes, less benefits, bust up the unions, and hard work. *Laissez-faire*, as the saying goes. Yet his Hooverization of Paris has predictably rubbed some the wrong way. The leading French newspaper *Le Monde*, for instance, reported on January 23, 2009 that Sarkozy is determined to restructure the university system along the for-profit lines of the United States, an idea fiercely contested by the political left. As Interior Minister in 2006, he had crushed a student uprising at the Sorbonne. Another controversial agenda item are his tough, one might even say ruthless or jingoistic, policies on crime, which are geared toward illegal immigrants of North African descent residing in disadvantaged communities. Statistical analysis is welcome in extemp, so consider this. The *International Herald Tribune* reported on January 2 of this year that 1,147 French cars were burned on New Year's Eve, a 30% spike over the 879 torched the previous year. Sarkozy is a practicing Catholic and has insinuated that Muslims are not welcome in France. Yet the French are a savvy people, capable of **instructing** themselves on how best to handle their President, **for as Victorian novelist William Thackeray stated, "What instruction is more effectual than self-instruction?"**

**It shall be effectual to consider our final point**, that President Sarkozy's personal leadership has lost the power to persuade. His ideology may gravitate toward the right, but his personal morality is closer to Woodstock 1968. William Hitchcock writes in *The Struggle for Europe* that French leaders have traditionally enjoyed wide latitude in private matters. Socialist President François Mitterand, for instance, secretly kept a mistress in Paris for years. In other words, having a little fun on the side is hardly an impeachable offense. But as the *Times* of London explained on May 8, 2009, Sarkozy has filled the Left Bank with lurid tales of his personal life. Thrice married, his current wife, Carla Bruni, is a former model and musician known to all Paris as a master intriguer of considerable sexual talents. Think Cleopatra meets Lady Macbeth. Sarkozy pulled a Rudy Giuliani: engaging in a messy divorce while in office. One need not necessarily see these issues like Billy Graham, except that they have proved an immense political distraction, preoccupying and embarrassing the nation as a whole. The *Financial Times* noted on May 31 of this year that the President's approval rating, at the time of the writing of that article, stood at a meager 32%; and we Americans might note that George Bush left office with similar numbers. The Socialist Party habitually lampoons everything about Sarkozy, from his intimidating bodyguards to his penchant for Rolex watches. In short, he has allowed his personal quirks to compromise his presidency. **Maybe the President should take a cue from perhaps the most famous European of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Mr. Bean, who, in war or peace, is fond of saying nothing at all.**

Therefore we return to the original question, "Has Sarkozy been an effective French President?" The record is clearly a mixed one, given that foreign relations have been right on the dot, the domestic agenda so-so, but personal leadership has passed the way of Napoleon after Waterloo. **We can only wish that President Sarkozy will discharge his duties with Austenian discretion, for as Samuel Richardson wrote in *Pamela*, "Things that we wish, are apt to gain a too ready credence with us."**