



When French President Nicolas Sarkozy and his wife, Carla Bruni, sit down for a private dinner with the Obamas on Tuesday evening, it will be a sign of their close ties. Eric Pape on just how far Sarkozy will go for such an intimate honor.

When Nicolas and Carla Sarkozy sit down with the Obamas on the evening of March 30 in the private White House dining room, the portions had better be big—France’s president has been hungry for this intimate encounter for quite some time. President Obama has seemed, well, a bit less enthusiastic, but perhaps that feeling is changing.



In Sarkozy’s world, such dinners are how relationships between powerful people are built, and how deals are sealed. But in France, there are rules of etiquette. For one, you don’t let on that you want/need the dinner too badly; it highlights an unbalanced relationship.

Unbalanced? Sarkozy invited Obama (and his early presidential glow) for a state dinner in Paris last June after a hefty ceremonial D-Day commemoration in Normandy; the Obamas opted for a private *dîner en famille* at a Parisian restaurant instead. Plenty of French people didn’t blame

Obama, and that gets to the heart of a problem that the French have with their own president. (More on that in a moment.)

But exactly how badly did Sarkozy, who is under siege at home, want this week's dinner? Sitting French presidents don't normally fly to the U.S. just to speak at Columbia University or announce that their **wife's foundation is creating a \$2 million French-American art student exchange scholarship at the French Institute Alliance Française**—and especially not two weeks before they return to the U.S. for a formal visit. The desire to be linked to Obama is so intense that Sarkozy's people are gaucheely bragging that no other European leader has yet been accorded such an intimate honor.

In Sarkozy, the French have an over-the-top, frenetic (and neurotic) political street fighter.

They wanted their own Obama; they got the French Rahm Emanuel—minus the ballet

skills.

Ironically, a sizable French majority—about the same percentage Obama won in 2008—voted for Sarkozy, and many of them support an array of policies that he has tried to put into place. His problem, as he governs, is that many people feel that he doesn't "incarnate" the French presidency the way he should. In an ideal world, the president of the republic would be an intelligent, eloquent, reserved, sophisticated, and broad-minded statesman. Instead the French have an over-the-top, frenetic (and neurotic) political street fighter. They wanted their own Obama as president; they got the French Rahm Emanuel—minus the ballet skills.

Marrying Carla Bruni amounted to a step up on the "incarnation" front, especially with the first lady's channeling Jackie O's style, it just didn't carry nearly him high enough. (To my nonagenarian French grandmother-in-law, who couldn't bring herself to vote for Sarkozy, "He's the kind of guy who puts his feet on the desk.")

It's worth noting that thus far France has emerged from the global economic crisis far less scathed than many of its European neighbors, and yet Sarkozy has gotten little credit at home. His main domestic initiatives have been a stop-and-go affair, while his legendary political salesmanship skills have largely failed him of late, never more than when his signature piece of climate legislation crashed and burned while Obama was leading through the storm on health care.

The result: In mid-March, Sarkozy's party endured a historic drubbing in regional elections. (To get a sense of the beating, imagine if, in the U.S., 48 of America's 50 state capitals simultaneously went Republican.) About two-thirds of the French now disapprove of their

president. The situation is so gloomy for Sarkozy that both his eccentric father, an aging, womanizing aristocratic Hungarian émigré, and Carla have recently suggested they would personally prefer that Sarkozy not run for reelection—for his own good.

Amid such grim political tides, a trip to America makes for a much-needed getaway, and it can also help back home. Sarkozy and Carla put the international kibosh on the widespread rumors—stirred up by Twitter—that their marriage was on the ropes by smooching and cuddling near a window-side table in New York City's Boat House restaurant—with politico-celebrity paparazzi snapping away outside.

And how better to clear the mind, or convey to French cameramen, that Sarkozy is an international man of action (and not a man trapped in the morass of French politics) than a vigorous jog through Central Park this weekend?

A worthy wink to French culture, and to his wife's altruistic endeavors, came on March 29, when the Sarkozys visited the French Institute Alliance Française to announce that the Carla Bruni-Sarkozy Foundation would channel \$2 million to a New York-Paris exchange program for talented and underprivileged art students.

In a notes-free speech at Columbia University on March 29, President Sarkozy called for trans-Atlantic collaboration to regulate international banking, prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear bomb through tougher sanctions, limit the pollution that worsens climate change, and fight international terrorism.

But such talk, even when well delivered, isn't going to open a new chapter in Sarkozy's presidency. To do that, he appears to want to link himself more closely to Brand Obama, which remains huge in France; the American president is generally about twice as popular as Sarkozy in French surveys.

None of this is to say that Obama and Sarkozy can't give each other some worthwhile tips over Tuesday's dinner. All policy aside, the French president could convey to Obama elements of Brand Sarkozy: relentless and visible action on behalf of the people, and trying everything until something works. It isn't always particularly focused, but sometimes people just demand action, regardless of what it is.

Sarkozy, meanwhile, would do well to learn to emulate some of President Obama's detached temperament. Then again, he might need to do something more extreme, like return to France wearing Obama as a cloak. He's trying. He's trying.

Eric Pape has reported on Europe and the Mediterranean region for Newsweek Magazine since 2003. He is co-author of the graphic novel Shake Girl, which was inspired by one of his articles. He has written for the Los Angeles Times magazine, Spin, Reader's Digest, Vibe, Courier International, Salon, and Los Angeles from five continents. He is based in Paris. Follow him at twitter.com/ericpape.