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THE FRENCH FIFTH REPUBLIC

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WITH DE GAULLE

We must have some chaos first," Charles de Gaulle told C.L. Sulzberger in December 1956. "This regime [the Fourth Republic] was made against me. Therefore it cannot call upon de Gaulle to save itself. De Gaulle is not prepared to save this regime." Indeed he was not. In May 1958 de Gaulle was better prepared to strike the final blow to a regime—
the régime des partis—that, in his view, had no national legitimacy. By then the "Good General" was ready to resume his past love affair with his Madonna toward whom he continued to show a weight of feeling extraordinarily touching.

"She lives," he would write simply of France in the spring of 1958, "as if surprised that France would have endured such protracted relationships with the "political chieftains" of the then-dying regime. "Never more than here, and never more than tonight have I understood how beautiful...France is," he said two weeks after he had returned to the helm of "this nation of still villages, ancient churches, hearty families...this country of legends...this millennial France."* On January 20, 1946, de Gaulle abandoned power convinced that he would return soon, called upon by the people—"whose voice is God’s voice"—who "instinctively" would turn to him for salvation. To be sure, he had not expected to wait so long for such a call. Two days before his resignation he had predicted his return "within a week." The weeks, however, turned into years, but, in May 1958, he returned as he had always wanted to: "I will be asked to return and, this time, I shall return on my terms."†

Not a regime, not even a constitution but a man, the Fifth Republic was not expected to last. As Raymond Aron wrote soon after the fateful events of 1958, "A regime dependent on one man as much as the Fifth Republic depends upon General de Gaulle is fundamentally in a precarious position."‡ "I was France, I am France," confirmed de Gaulle. He was like the Louis XIV described by


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Throughout the first decade of the new republic the Gaullists were, therefore, in the paradoxical position of arguing simultaneously for the indispensability of their leader and the perfection of the institutions he had created. Thus, each political campaign, each national referendum was fought against a backdrop of the threat that de Gaulle’s departure would raise for the durability of the regime. Voting for or against de Gaulle was tantamount to voting for or against the regime. To paraphrase Charles Péguy’s poem, “It’s a nuisance, God said, When de Gaulle is gone no one will be left to understand the things we did.”

When de Gaulle is gone: The debate, then, was over the regime—not an unusual occurrence in France where the opposition had hitherto never been fully satisfied with the mere criticism of policy. Alternatives were presented in the worst possible historical light: Would the Fifth Republic be replaced by the Fourth Republic (as the Gaullists warned), would it become the Third Republic or even the Second Empire (as, ironically, de Gaulle’s critics wondered), or would it evolve into a Sixth Republic (as implied in the then-prevailing calls for constitutional reforms)? These fears, of course, never materialized. Instead, responsive to the continued growth of public support for the new institutions—a support which increased following de Gaulle’s departure in April 1969—the Socialists and the Communists, too, accepted the essence of the regime, namely, the Constitution of 1958, as amended in 1962. Hence the end of the “war of the Republics” that was achieved by June 1972: the political game would take place within a constitutional framework, the resilience of which was to be demonstrated once more in May 1981.

Successful as an antipartisan consciousness, Gaullism was less effective as a partisan political force. From the very beginning the UDR (Union des Démocrates pour la République) had been a majority before it ever became a party. As such, it sought a closer identification with the General (to increase its majority in the National Assembly) while preserving some distance from him (to assert its identity and ensure its survival). Under de Gaulle the task was easy, and the Gaullist party received its impetus from the charismatic appeal of its heroic leader. Under Georges Pompidou, however, the party was denied de Gaulle’s monumental presence and based instead its political success on a widespread sense of prosperity and the fear of an alternative, which the nation seemingly tasted and discarded during the tumultuous events of May 1968.

FPI POLICY BRIEFS

THE FRENCH FIFTH REPUBLIC

At first this proved to be effective, and the Fifth Republic became identified with the political party that carried out de Gaulle’s legacy. The regime had become l’État UDR. However, following Pompidou’s sudden death, the UDR was left with neither leadership nor identity. Clearly, a political party so heavily dependent on the antipartisan legacy received from de Gaulle was itself in a fundamentally precarious position. In 1969 de Gaulle’s forced withdrawal had been treated like a family tragedy, not to be discussed publicly or with strangers. In the papers there had been talk of patricide. Now, however, while many self-appointed Gaullist leaders remained, all merely sought to ensure their political futures by reasserting their faithful commitment to the General’s legacy. Yet so did the opposition, and in 1974 the electorate could no longer perceive much difference among the various Gaullist contenders or much danger in the “adventure” of the newly signed Common Program between the Socialist party (Parti Socialiste, PS) and the Communist party (Parti Communiste Français, PCF). In the presidential elections of 1974 it was therefore possible to vote against a Gaullist candidate without voting against Gaullism, or to vote for the socialist candidate (François Mitterrand) without voting against the regime. Once elected, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing found it similarly possible to ignore the Gaullist deputies without being opposed by them. Unlike his predecessor, however, president Giscard was not also the head of the majority party of “his” majority.

Aware of the necessity to preserve the alignment of the majority in parliament with the presidential majority that had elected him, Giscard urged his first prime minister, Jacques Chirac, to control and contain the UDR’s erosion and divisions before the next legislative elections, then scheduled for the spring of 1978. By mid-June 1975 Chirac had essentially fulfilled this task, and his leadership of the party became generally unchallenged, a few isolated voices notwithstanding.

However, neither Chirac nor the UDR could long remain satisfied with the status quo. During the 1974 presidential campaign the two dominant figures of the majority had relied on one another to fulfill their ambitions. Without Chirac, Giscard might not have been president, but without Giscard, Chirac would not have become prime minister. Yet, after such ambitions had been fulfilled, each man stood in the way of the other: Giscard wanted Chirac, as prime minister, to help him remain president. Chirac was willing to be prime minister providing he could replace Giscard. The dilemma that grew out of this conflict, which de Gaulle’s constitution had made possible, could only be resolved by the departure of one or the other of the two men. The prime minister could not see his president fail, because the Left might then prove to be difficult to dismiss; nor could the president see his prime minister succeed, because Chirac himself then might prove to be difficult to control.

To be sure, Giscard did try to escape this dependence on a revived Gaullist party—later named Rassemblement pour la République (RPR)—even before his break with Chirac became inevitable. However, there was no center to be found right of an ascending Socialist party, and there was no room to be uncovered as yet left of the Gaullists. Increasingly convinced that Giscard was paving the way for a socialist victory, the Gaullists therefore increased their pressure, aiming at Giscard’s quick replacement by the new dauphin, Jacques Chirac.
A victory of the Left in the legislative elections of March 1978, it was assumed, would establish a socialist prime minister. But Chirac’s party would accept no such coexistence or “cohabitation,” as it is now called, between the Left and the Right.

If Gaullism under de Gaulle had been based on une idée de la France, and if Giscard seemed at first to base his action on an idea of her people, Chirac was to base his action on an idea of himself, as it became clear from 1976 on. The idée de Chirac would be to present Chirac as a “rampant against weakness,” the weakness being, needless to say, Giscard himself—his “tragic hesitations,” as former prime minister Michel Debré phrased it in October 1976. Thus became the long descent of the majority.

From the late 1970s through 1981 the gains of the French Left continued in spite (and because) of an increasingly ineffective Communist party.

BEFORE MITTERRAND

Nevertheless, such disarray of the Right did not help resolve the perennial question: Could the Left ever win in France? Earlier in the decade, faced with dwindling membership, worn-out leadership, and creeping policy irrelevance, both the Socialist and Communist parties had been edging onto the sidelines of the Fifth Republic. To the former, an alliance with the PCF might help excape the image of a centrist compromises and restore the legitimacy of its original socialist vocation. To the declining Communist party, the PSC might help overcome the image of a foreign Stalinist party and regain a national legitimacy lost since the decisive events of May 1947. To both parties, the Union of the Left that was signed in 1972 was expected to give time to regroup, rebuild, and renovate in anticipation of the post-Gaulist years.

By the fall of 1977 such expectations of mutually satisfactory benefits were no longer valid. Given the considerable gains achieved by its partner at the expense of the Communists, the PSC was understandably discontented. Accustomed to being nationally isolated, the party could not readily also accept a growing isolation from the constituencies it had thus far considered its own. Previously accepted as a political convenience, the Union had become such a handicap to a communist resurgence as to justify a new struggle against the alleged bourgeois corruptibility of the PS.

There is little doubt that the resulting divisions of the Left proved to be determining (if not decisive) in the legislative elections of March 1978. It ensured Giscard’s victory, in spite of the Right, without permitting the gains anticipated by communist leader Georges Marchais, in spite of the electoral gains of the Left. Furthermore, the PSC’s increasing criticism of François Mitterrand fed the suspicions of a skeptical French populace still unsure of the democratic conversion of a party historically compromised by thirty years of systematic opposition to the regime, subservient allegiance to Moscow, and deplorable internal structures. Neither the PSC’s occasional admissions of historical guilt, nor its short-lived attempts to widen the distance between the party and the Soviet Union, nor even a few structural and ideological adjustments could mitigate the sentiment that the party’s tainted past might still be the rubric to its future. In the latter half of the 1970s, and through 1981, the gains of the French Left continued in spite (and because) of an increasingly ineffective Communist party, which suffered setbacks in sharp contrast to the impressive successes of its socialist ally.

Throughout, Mitterrand’s stature grew steadily as he became an increasingly serene figure in an otherwise troubled French political landscape. Even before Mitterrand had assumed leadership of the new Socialist party in 1971, his political life had unfolded in a deceptive past tense—never enough of a present, it was uncovered, and never much of a future, it was thought. In 1978 he had been the true winner of the legislative elections. This was after all the best electoral performance of the Socialists since October 1945, not only had they done better than the Communists (for the first time since the end of World War II), but they also were the only party in France to receive an increased share of the vote since the previous elections. Nevertheless, such results were seen as a meager consolation prize, and the implication of these trends were soon overlooked. In 1980 Mitterrand’s presidential campaign appeared unlikely to overtake Giscard’s apparently insurmountable lead, and it was dismissed as an electoral swan song meant to accompany his final departure from the national political scene.

Once more, the announcement of Mitterrand’s imminent demise proved to be premature. What André Gide had said of himself applied to the president to be: “I do not wish to be a slave…to my past, a slave to my faith…[I] want the terms upon which I lease out my life…to be renewable at any given moment.” Indeed, it was the perception of this flexibility that enabled Mitterrand to persuade and reassure the few hundred thousand floating voters who had denied him victory in 1974 and 1978. Alternating between his many leaderships (of the PS in fact, of the Left in theory, and of France in anticipation), Mitterrand showed the very skills at desacrametization that Giscard—indeed the victim of extraordinarily difficult international circumstances over which he had hardly any control—appeared to lack. To reassure his right, Mitterrand exposed the marginality of the Communist party; to reassure his left, he preempted Michel Rocard’s short-lived candidacy and continued to promote his vision of socialism as “the newest idea in the world.”

Beyond the rise of the Left and the divisions of the Right, Giscard also lost the election because the France that had found it so difficult to understand him during the first half of his presidency had later come to understand him all too well. Poor Giscard: he had begun his presidency full of promises. A favorite critic de Gaulle’s “solitary use of power,” he wanted to bring the opposition to the Elysée, and the Elysée to the people. Unlike de Gaulle, he did not view his leadership as preordained by God or history to fulfill great deeds for the benefit of France. At first, his anti-Gaulism had been almost excessive and, on occasion, naive. He had promised a new approach that would be “simple” and “direct” and would help “dust off” de Gaulle’s republic. In a country used to a remote, haughty, hierarchical brand of authority, Giscard wanted to introduce the presidency as a humane profession, one that he himself had not longed for and from which he would happily walk away. “I am very much of a relativist,” he said in May 1974. “One does not know anything, one never knows where the impact is going to lead one. One knows nothing.” According to Giscard, to govern would therefore be no more than “to manage the unpredictable.”
Seven years after his inauguration, however, he had himself become far too unpredictable to be entrusted with another seven-year mandate. Progressively, the French populace had come to dislike most what could be understood best: what Giscard did (reflected by an economy in apparent disarray after years of Guillaumat prosperity) and what he failed to do (abroad, concerning Chad and Afghanistan); what he said (to the media, which he wanted to rule too) or failed to say (about the many scandals that beset his political friends, then his family, and, finally, his very person); and, of course, what he had become—aloof, arrogant, and even threatening. Yet, ironically enough, Mitterrand’s triumph at the subsequent legislative elections of late June 1981 was also the triumph of the man who had first defeated him in 1965. For then indeed, the durability of de Gaulle’s institutions was clearly shown as they permitted an orderly and starting switch from Right to Left under a most impressive display of democratic health and vitality.

France had seemed an unlikely candidate for such a drastic yet simple and orderly transfer of power. For more than twenty-three years since the founding of the Fifth Republic, the prospect of the Left coming to power through the National Assembly or the presidency weighed upon public sentiments and fascinated analysts with the likelihood of an institutional breakdown because of debilitating clashes between president and parliament. The scenarios were always overdrawn by those whose memory of the Fourth Republic’s instability remained vivid and exaggerated. With his Fifth Republic constitution, however, de Gaulle had created a system with a viable and compelling logic that imposed sanctions on mediocrity by insuring an ever-possible alternative. Accordingly, when Giscard appeared to fail to measure up to the standards established by his predecessors—or at least sufficiently enough to justify another seven-year mandate—the French electorate turned to Mitterrand in the hope of better times and restored effectiveness in the highest office of the land.

Following the logic of the constitution, Mitterrand next needed a socialist majority in the National Assembly. Whereas Center-Right presidents had governed with coalitions for most of the Fifth Republic, the French electorate understood that a coalition of Centrists and Socialists was a sure recipe for instability, and it might force the FS to depend on the PCF, a prospect deemed altogether unwise. In providing Mitterrand with an absolute majority and the legislative ability to govern for no less than five years, the electorate therefore confirmed the ingenuity of a constitution flexible enough to accommodate such a dramatic reversal of political fortunes. It also confirmed de Gaulle’s choice of an electoral regime rigid enough to give 54 percent of the seats in the new Assembly to a party that had gained 36 percent of the votes.

As de Gaulle was the first leader of postwar France to bring Communists into the government, so then was Mitterrand’s first major political decision to do the same an integral part of the de Gaulle legacy. The source of much controversy abroad, especially in the United States, such a decision was nevertheless acceptable to the French precisely because the Communists were at the nadir of their influence and could hardly raise serious problems for the socialist majority without facing, for a while at least, an abrupt and politically damaging dismissal. Instead, as the FS saw it, the requirements of government responsibility might well favor the presence of moderate elements in the French communist world, thereby completing in this case too, the process that de Gaulle had launched in 1958: the demise of a certain kind of Communist party.

Like his two predecessors, the new French president would now enact for France and the world his own version of de Gaulle’s vision. His court itself was not without resemblance to the Gauloises of the belle époque. The best and the brightest of the new France came from the old schools; they had been Socialists in the 1970s as they would have been Gaulois during the previous decade. They liked neither the communist Left (in opposition to which many of them were politically awakened in October 1968) nor the conservative Right (which they had tried to topple in May 1968). They did believe, however, in their fate as the architects of tomorrow’s stronger, wealthier, and juster society at home—just as they believed abroad in their mission to promote France’s historic role of avanti-garde in the struggle against all forms of tyranny and barbarism, whether or not with a human face. Often, history to them was what remained when everything else had been forgotten: such bad memory helped them imagine a rosy future with a characteristically good conscience. But the awakening was likely to be brutal: power might not corrupt them, it would only wear them out or help create new ambitions for more power (as was to be the case for young Prime Minister Laurent Fabius).

During the Giscard years France had looked a bit like an ungalloping horse, each of whose legs was proceeding at its own pace toward its own projet de société. Mitterrand’s victory had in a sense liberated the horse, which during the years to come would gallop away, or so it was hoped. Better days were foreseeable everywhere: this France claimed to know where she was going, and the people who danced in the streets of Paris on the fateful nights of May 1981 believed in the promises that had been made by the new majority—“Paris,” a communist poet had once written, “which is Paris only when it tears its cobblestones.” This, of course, is where Giscard had begun. This was where Mitterrand was beginning. This, undoubtedly, is where Mitterrand’s replacement will also begin.

INTO THE WORLD

“The foreign policy of France,” an apparently satisfied Giscard had noted in early February 1978, “is a topic over which there is a large enough national agreement.” As de Gaulle had seen it, and as Pompidou had confirmed it, the Fifth Republic would mark the end of the political games of the previous republic and launch a foreign policy behind which the French would be all the more united, as it would be based on a "certain idea of France," as a country "in charge altogether of her heritage of the past, her interests of the present, and her hopes for the future." At first, Giscard had shown little interest in les grandes affaires. Thus, when he found it desirable to enter the then-ongoing debate over various projects
of society by issuing a book, Démocratie Française, only seven unspiring pages dealt with the role of France in the world. Gone was de Gaulle’s emphasis on foreign policy, which Giscard accepted only reluctantly, as one of the necessary instruments that might help achieve “the transformation of French society.” Gone too was de Gaulle’s ambition to transform unilaterally the international milieu. In Giscard’s initial view, the reshuffling that the General had wished to promote, and which his immediate successor had accepted to endure, had not come out quite as expected. Problems faced by the nation had become problems of “the survival of the species, of growth and progress”; they required an interdependence that was otherwise lacking (a “prise de conscience supplémentaire entre les nations.”) The “civilization of groups” celebrated by de Gaulle had become a “world-wide civilization,” which alone might help France escape an “unhappy world.”

Throughout his presidency, foreign-policy issues helped reinforce the general impression that Giscard was aloof, out of touch with reality, and generally ineffective at handling affairs of the state. At first, uninformed about foreign and security issues, Giscard painfully tried to absorb the standard vocabulary and intricate symbolism of assertiveness and independence expected of heads of state in the Fifth Republic. Nonetheless, he remained unable to uncover viable formulas that might impress upon the French people that he was capable of safeguarding the national interest in an increasingly hostile world.

Instead, the French president was increasingly confronted with a series of international crises that inspired embarrassing reactions and subsequent reversals on the part of his government. This became all too visible as Giscard’s mandate came to an end. In Afghanistan, for example, in which case his initial reaction was to label the victims of Soviet intervention “rebels.” Later, following some rhetorical adjustments, Giscard’s ill-conceived meeting with Brezhnev showed that the French president had grasped neither the tactical nor the symbolic requirements of de Gaulle’s independence formula. Nearly simultaneously, the fiasco in Chad and the Central African Republic and Giscard’s failure to dispute and criticize the Soviet deployment of SS-20s (which threatened France as much as any other country in Western Europe), appeared to indicate a president who had lost control of his foreign policy. Because the presidents of France hold an exclusive constitutional right to such matters, the sense of personal failure on his part was perhaps even more pronounced in this domain than in that of domestic affairs.1

The French Left, too, faced awkward moments in coping with the Gauillist foreign-policy model. In line with their opposition to de Gaulle’s domestic policies, the Socialists opposed most of his foreign-policy initiatives of the sixties—the fatal wound inflicted upon the supranational integration of the EEC.


1This view can be said of Mitterrand, of course; the embarrassment suffered in the aftermath of the Franco-Libyan agreement of September 1984, the ill-conceived notion of a treaty of European Union that flourished at the June 1986 meeting of the European Commission, the premature rejection of President Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative, and the Gauillist affair have all helped dispel the image of a government that lacks the competence required for the effective management of its foreign policy. The veiling debate, though, is not over substance (over which there remains a general agreement) but over form.

The creation of an autonomous nuclear force, the withdrawal from NATO—unlike the Communists, who found advantage in such French dissidence within the West, and confined their most vehement foreign-policy opposition to the nuclear force because they mistakenly hoped to secure a neutral (and indirectly pro-Soviet) status for France that de Gaulle had never contemplated and would not have tolerated.

In the 1970s, however, as the Union of the Left was undergoing its travails, both parties saw a growing advantage in fully accepting the Gaullist model and reshaping it for their own purposes. They had learned that such a model was flexible and ambiguous enough to help fulfill national aspirations that suited both the legacy and their own ideological concerns. Accordingly, just as by the late 1960s they had accepted the political institutions that no party could oppose and still hope to remain a viable political force, during the 1970s the parties of the opposition found that the curnoue of Gaullist foreign policy provided abundant material to suit their shifting and often diverging interests.

To be sure, even while the Union lasted, disagreements over foreign and security policies remained numerous. Yet, significantly enough, the explanations and justifications used by both parties to present their positions relied increasingly upon the Gaullist model as a guideline and natural point of reference. By 1981 François Mitterrand and the PS therefore seemed to incarnate the principles and the aspirations of the Gaullist legacy better than Giscard and his truncated majority. But then the foreign-policy risks of letting the Socialists govern France had increasingly evaporated along with related domestic fears. Instead, a socialist government was seen by many (most apparently) as the best way to salvage France’s international prestige and influence.

Perhaps satisfied with an orderly departure of the Gaullist majority in France—which for twenty-three years had been seen in Washington as the source of so many crises in Franco- and European-American relations, but also the victim of its misunderstanding of Giscard’s foreign and security policies—the Reagan administration lost no time in welcoming the socialist victory and praising a socialist France as America’s newly found best ally in Europe.8

That the Reagan administration would have welcomed Mitterrand’s election, and even acted as if it wished to promote the subsequent socialist victory in the June legislative elections, reflects, to be sure, a laudable willingness to reconcile itself to the inevitable: What else could it do? Yet, this reaction demonstrated a misunderstanding of the political significance of the socialist victory, on the one hand, and betrayed its inflated expectations concerning the socialist positions on foreign policy and defense issues, on the other.9

8During the previous years, France, of course, had always been a difficult and reluctant ally. After the end of World War II, with Great Britain on the decline and Germany irreversibly divided, the 1960 French nationalism had quickly turned to the two superpowers—neither of which was accepted as a worthy competitor, even under the worst national circumstances of economic impoverishment, political divisions, and military impotence. There were two technologies that catholique writers (and a few Gaullists) François Mitterrand dismissed in early 1950 as “two technologies which, in the international view, as antagonists but are dragging humanity toward the same dehumanization.” Not surprisingly, then, close ties with the United States were tolerated with an ambivalence that, under both proverb republics, has evolved according to the flow of domestic and international circumstances.
Thus, the Reagan administration welcomed the election of a president in France who had himself been the main target of communist leader Georges Marchais’s harshest attacks throughout the presidential campaign and whose candidacy had been repeatedly opposed by Moscow. Concomitantly, the U.S. administration celebrated the electoral decline of the PCF and assumed that Mitterrand’s victory marked the end of actual or potential communist influence in France—a process that had actually begun under de Gaulle in 1958, when the PCF lost about one million voters who have not been recovered since. Accordingly, there was much surprise in Washington when Mitterrand ignored the objections raised by some of his closest aides and named four communist ministers in his first government. Coming on the eve of Vice President Bush’s arrival in Paris, the reaction of the State Department (and its seeming adoption of the standards set by president Ford during the Portuguese crisis of the mid-1970s) nearly defeated the good will that had been sought, and gained, during the previous weeks.

Certainly, the end of a political taboo that had shaped the political realities of Western Europe since 1947 was bound to concern the U.S. administration. Yet, the fact of communist participation in the French government no longer needed to be so dramatized. The very conditions under which the PCF came into government showed the full scope of its decline: in the wake of successive electoral disasters an essentially inert communist leadership in disarray sought the charity of a self-assured and newly dominant Socialist party, in return for which it made whatever concessions were required (especially over Afghanistan and the Soviet deployment of SS-20s). The bargain was struck because the Socialists wanted to buy the silence of the Communists (and that of the Communist-sponsored labor union) while the main element of its economic policy was set in place under politically difficult circumstances of high unemployment. Yet such an informal pact could be temporary only. Had they materialized in fact, Mitterrand’s successes at home would have made it no longer necessary; as it came to be shown, its actual failures made it no longer desirable from the standpoint of the Socialists, who therefore withdrew from the government three years later in July 1984. If anything, the Reagan administration might have been more apprehensive by Mitterrand’s earlier rhetoric on East-West issues. A few months before his election, wasn’t Mitterrand still comparing his support for the Alliance with that of a Romanian or a Pole for the alliance with the Soviet Union, and wasn’t he equating the military imperialism of the Soviets with the economic imperialism of the United States?4

In the late 1970s Giscard’s search for additional distance from the United States reflected the French (and European) exaggerated contemplation of a declining America: the weakening of U.S. institutions, strain by ailments therefore the sole privilege of the old and decaying states of Western Europe; the degradation of U.S. power, no longer able to ensure Europe’s vital interests; and the natural divergence of U.S.-European interests, with the latter progressively moving toward issues of economic security at the expense of the perennial issues of political security. To the successor generation of the 1970s, the very convergence that, under Mitterrand’s leadership, had chosen the socialist option, the distance that was sought from the United States had little to do with a benign neglect of the Soviet threat, of which it was in fact more conscious than during the years that had shaped the policies of the earlier generation. Instead, it was the American promise that was being reappraised—a promise apparently shattered during the painful years of political, economic, and military decline that grew out of the crises of Vietnam, OPEC, and Watergate.

Following a difficult start, when the new American president seemed about to set the same fresh standards of unpopularity achieved by every new president since Truman, Reagan proved successful in France because of his ability to reverse these trends and restore the perception of a renewed American promise. Moreover, Reagan was implicitly understood in Gaullist terms—the regrouping of the nation around one man and above the political parties to ensure the renewal of a nation threatened by too many years of immobilism at home and abroad. Such perceptions were themselves helped by a policy that made INF deployment the priority of all priorities. In so doing, the Reagan administration showed unusual tolerance toward any European criticism of its policies elsewhere; for example, the French early focus on Central America was readily dismissed, and its early criticism of U.S. economic and monetary policies went unheared. When mistakes were made, these were corrected quickly: objections to communist participation in the French government were soon set aside; harsh rhetoric toward the Soviet Union gave way, as early as November 1981, to a readiness for talks that muted the initial outburst of neutralist sentiment throughout Western Europe; and ill-conceived reprisals on the question of the Yomk pipeline were quickly hushed within the framework of patient and generally successful negotiations on the question of East-West trade.

In the end, in 1981-88 the only issue over which there could be an agreement among the governments of the West was also the most divisive: INF deployment. By using his influence over the West German government, Mitterrand proved to be an invaluable ally to the United States, and the consensus that was articulated so vividly at the 1983 Williamsburg Summit is in part due to him. By then, earlier tensions seemed moot. The American economy was in full swing, and the French populace proved to be especially impressed with the scope and the pace of a recovery that fed the export-led recoveries of most other Western states. They responded to a rearmament effort, which they found to be all the more significant as the Soviets were themselves displaying much diplomatic insensitivity peaking with their own withdrawal from the Geneva talks in November 1981. Accordingly, they applauded Reagan’s re-election in November 1984 as the victory of une âge de l’Amérique—dominant and sure of itself, to use another one of de Gaulle’s favorite phrases. As a result, therefore, it was paradoxically up to the most conservative administration in Washington since 1945 to make the traditionally bad pupil of the Atlantic class its favorite partner in Europe—Mitterrand’s socialism and his communist ministers notwithstanding.

Reagan proved successful in France because of his ability to reverse the impression of a declining America and restore the perception of a renewed American promise.

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4After all, couldn’t President Reagan claim, like de Gaulle, that “all of my life I have had a certain idea” of the United States? In his Memoires of the Fifth Republic, de Gaulle described at length the “great effort” that was required to close the gap between “the people and me . . . this seventy-year old man, sitting alone behind a table and under merciless lights.” This image is not without evoking similar circumstances that now prevail in Washington, where Reagan could, with de Gaulle apropos, “If, all of a sudden, I were to display my intentions, a wave of stupidity and anger would undoubtedly rise across the ocean of alarmed ignorance, outraged dismay and corroded opposition, and the ship would capsize. I navigate until the time when, decisively, good sense will penetrate the fog.”
WITH MITTERRAND

At home, the decline of the French Left following its extraordinary victories in May–June 1981, did not take long to materialize. The socialist programs were two-fold: to improve the state of the French economy and to transform the structures of French society. At first the government of prime minister Pierre Mauroy assumed that it could do both. Such expectations were partly based on the perception—which the French gained at the 1981 Ottawa Summit—that there would be a quick recovery of the American economy that would coincide with a significant drop in real interest rates. Accordingly, the first program of the government, from June to October 1981, was essentially the opposite of Reaganomics (even though, ironically, the success of the former depended on the effectiveness of the latter). In short, the French program was an experiment in budget balancing and income redistribution designed to increase the government’s role in the management of the economy and permit the emergence of a more equitable society. Its methods included reducing the huge budget deficit and implementing new nationalizations, back-to-work programs, shorter work weeks without wage adjustments, and a variety of wealth taxes and special levies on high income.

Not surprisingly, this program did not work, in part hampered by a sharp recession in the United States. In October 1981–June 1982 the Mauroy government, therefore, took a number of austerity measures that seemed to postpone the search for a “new society” in order to improve the performance of the economy. The decision to adopt a new strategy—which included a first devaluation of the French franc (too late and too little) and a freeze on prices and wages—was seen as a step away from the government’s initial expansionary policies. These actions also proved to be insufficient, and in 1982–83 the deterioration of the French economy continued, thereby putting the stage for a full-fledged austerity program. Called “rigor” by the French, the new program was announced by Mitterrand in the aftermath of the regional elections of March 1983 and has continued to this day under the direction of Laurent Fabius, a young protégé of Mitterrand who was appointed prime minister in June 1984.

The tendency of the opposition in France has traditionally been to exaggerate the terms of the political debate and to present specific issues of economic management in inflated terms that raise expectations and thus, tensions as well—in the light of the promised changes. Since 1985 the French government’s budget has been called “budgeting” for its inability to contain its spending. Thus, this program was imposed instead on their respective competence to pursue existing austerity programs. To be sure, there are, in and between each side, differences on the pace and the scope of the economic “rigor” that would be required in the coming years. Yet, the impression remains one of converging attitudes that have helped shape a new policy consensus oblivious to past debates over various projets de société.

This is especially true with regard to the role of the state in the economy. Earlier, socialist efforts to escape the tyranny of the market had centered around nationalizing some of France’s largest industrial groups, banks, and financial concerns, as well as two failing steel companies taken over in November 1981. Since 1983, however, the results of these nationalizations have been so tenuous, to say the least, as to bring a majority of the Socialist party to reappraise the situation and consider some sort of denationalization in the future. Certainly, the PS continues to oppose the systematic and comprehensive program offered by the opposition, preferring a more flexible approach that would allow some firms to leave (or, possibly, even enter) the public sector according to circumstances. Yet, the opposition, too, intends to implement its commitment to a privatization program (which would also include the return to private enterprise of the banks and insurance companies nationalized by de Gaulle immediately after the war) with a prudence born out of the considerable sums involved in a sell-off of state shares estimated at a total of 145 billion francs.

The general theme of the opposition is, therefore, a return to the forces of the market (also enhanced by a program of deregulation) within the framework of an austerity program that would be reinforced and, indeed, extended. Yet, the opposition finds it politically convenient to emphasize its differences with the Reagan model, and the “society of freedom” advocated in its twenty-point program would preserve much of the socialist legacy of the past five years: the thirty-nine-hour work week, the fifth week of paid vacation, or the early retirement at age sixty are all changes that have remained generally popular among the electorate. Also common to all, Left and Right, is the determination to avoid any reliance on massive budget deficits and an escalating public debt, as well as a vague commitment to reducing unemployment.

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Nineteen eighty-six will mark the final step in a maturing process that has characterized the evolution of the Fifth Republic. In 1958 the new regime first required a strong and dominant man, not an unusual feature in French history. Next, the vacuum that was left after de Gaulle departed was quickly filled by the man he had himself selected as a replacement—Georges Pompidou. In May 1974 the victory of Valéry Giscard d’Estaing over François Mitterrand opened a third phase in the history of the Fifth Republic. No longer a man primarily (as under de Gaulle) nor a political party primarily (as under Pompidou), the regime was led by a president who could no longer claim to embody the regime or to head the majority party of the majority. This caused a revival of French politics that, in 1981, led to the fourth step in this natural evolution: the principle of democratic alternative as, after twenty-three years of opposition, the parties of the Left gained both the presidency and the National Assembly. What now remains to be seen is whether the regime can also survive a distribution of power that permits the political coexistence of a socialist president and a Gaullist prime minister.

Similarly, during its first fifteen years, the Fifth Republic was debated in terms of its very ability to endure as a regime. As written in an editorial of Le Monde in May 1965, any such regime, if it was feared, might “lead to difficulties and...tragic aftereffects, just as much as those disorderly regimes which it is supposed to cor- rect.” With the end of the debate over the survivability of the regime began

1 I am indebted to the thorough description and discussion of the scope and limits of such policy conver- gences, at home and abroad, which appears in Michael M. Harrison, "France in Suspense," SAIS Review, Winter-Spring 1986.
a debate over the sort of society that such a regime, now accepted by all, would help shape. In 1981 Mitterrand's projet appeared to be more appealing, and sufficiently credible, to a majority of the French electorate to bring him to power. A rate of unemployment that stood at 7.6 percent was seen as reflective of the failure of a society deemed fundamentally unjust and unfair. Today, however, unemployment stands at 10.1 percent: more modestly, the debate has shifted to more mundane issues of management.

Seen in this light, the upcoming elections of March 16 need not be over dramatized. First, these elections are likely to show once more the resilience of a French political system, which has endured all possible scenarios, without any major upheaval comparable to what French history has traditionally been accustomed to. Second, unlike 1981 (when the victory of the Left remained doubtful until the very end), the outcome of these elections is indeed foreseeable: a new majority headed by the RPR with the support of the centrist Union pour la Démocratie Française (UDF), in spite of last-minute polls showing an apparent resurgence of the PS, helped by an improved economy and a newly assertive president. Mitterrand's dramatic decision to change the French electoral system aimed at preventing any one party from representing the PS as the majority party in the National Assembly. Such a decision was hardly new in a country where tampering with the electoral system has been such an established practice that the constitution of the Fifth Republic did not specify any electoral regime beyond universal suffrage. The effort succeeded to the extent that the RPR will thereby be denied the majority that it might otherwise have enjoyed after March 16. But it will probably fail to prevent a coalition of the Center-Right forces from enjoying enough of a majority to deny Mitterrand the political room he hopes to gain out of a renewed proliferation of the parties in the Assembly.

Everything that is known of the French president mitigates against a decision on his part to leave the office that he worked so hard to acquire. For forty years Mitterrand's main characteristic has been more a will to be than a will to do—and, since 1981, more a will to remain than a will to act. To be sure, Mitterrand's concern for history might make an early withdrawal, à la de Gaulle, tempting: hurt by the lack of gratitude of a French populace that would have become indifferent to his achievements, he would return to his village to satisfy his substantial literary talents. Yet, Mitterrand's own history also shows that the seeds of tomorrow's victory are often planted in today's defeat. Even as he struggles to shape the form and the duration of cohabitation, he will, no doubt, fight for a new presidential victory at a time of his own choosing.

This, of course, is the real prize of the political games now about to unfold in France. Former prime minister Raymond Barre's apparent predilection for living France's future in the past tense reflects his need for a quick presidential election, which would enable him to take advantage of his current popularity. Like de Gaulle in 1958, Barre wants to be the savior of the institutions. Isolated from the political parties, he can boast of his personal strength (hence his standing in the polls), even as he is hampered by a real organizational weakness (as such support might erode as quickly as it surfaced). To go to the Élysée, Barre must be sure that no one is able to go to Matignon: his leadership must come from the people because he has no party willing to acknowledge it. In short, he is the remnant against any political accommodation.

This is not true, of course, of Chirac, whose leadership is first of all a party likely to become the majority party of the new majority following the elections next spring. With the French people increasingly well disposed toward cohabitation, Chirac, a likely prime minister, would play the card of the jumelage with this government to give him the time he needs to gain outside his party the popularity he clearly enjoys within it. In short, he is the remnant against any institutional erosion.

A similar strategy is followed by Giscard. However, where Chirac plays the card of the jumelage with the Fifth Republic (while Barre emphasizes the déjà dit of the Fourth Republic), Giscard plays the card of the déjà lu of the Third Republic: in 1992, another former President, Raymond Poincaré, agreed to serve as finance minister in the government of a prime minister, from which he worked his way back into the position of premier with more important powers than a devalued president. In short, Giscard is the remnant against any political exclusion.

With the main contenders of the current opposition having made their choice, the only remaining uncertainties then evolve, once again, around Mitterrand's own choices. But are those uncertainties real, or does the logic of the Fifth Republic also impose strict limits on the president's action?

To refuse cohabitation, and accept Barre's thesis of a threat to the institutions of the Fifth Republic, would work to the advantage of the presidential candidates who currently dominate all public-opinion polls not only Raymond Barre but also Michel Rocard; that is, the two political figures Mitterrand is known to be most hostile to. To accept cohabitation while attempting to escape Chirac by turning to Giscard as his new prime minister might help Mitterrand revive the struggles that prevailed in 1976–81, divide the new majority, and increase the president's room for political maneuver. But even Giscard's failure would hardly benefit Mitterrand. It would merely confirm Giscard's past failures, from which Mitterrand has already benefited. Turning to a compromise candidate—whether the young (Giscard's former protégé, François Léotard), the old (former prime minister Jacques Chaban-Delmas), or the technocrat (former finance minister Jacques Delors)—would meet with the coalesced opposition of all (Chirac, Barre, and Giscard) who would increase their criticism of a president engaging in such dangerous political games on behalf of his personal ambitions. In sum, the president's choice, too, is likely to follow the rules of March, Barre for Barre, and Barre for the leader of the majority party of the new majority (that is, Jacques Chirac) would display his willingness to abide by the rules of the democratic game, test the boundaries of his presidential authority, and

By turning to Jacques Chirac, Mitterrand can await the propitious moment for a crisis that would be most conducive to his presidential candidacy.
FPI POLICY BRIEFS

await the propitious moment for a crisis that would be best conducive to his presidential candidacy.\(^*\)

Yet, such remaining ambiguities notwithstanding, the evolution of the French Republic will follow its course and, if anything, France is likely to emerge out of the travails of the coming months as a stronger and more stable country. As argued earlier, the socialist setbacks of the past five years, coming after the conservative setbacks of the previous years, have helped build a new consensus over domestic economic and (though to a lesser extent) social issues as well. In the area of foreign policy, too, the debate has been muted because of the all-confining “cage” set by the Gauvillist foreign-policy and security model.

To be sure, Mitterrand (who has shown a neo-Atlanticist penchant) might be deemed preferable, in Washington at least, to Barre (whose Gaullism is also lived in the past tense, with an emphasis on the years 1966–88, when de Gaulle’s challenge to the United States was peaking)—and Chirac might be judged preferable to Mitterrand, to the extent that he would probably reverse Mitterrand’s opposition to President Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative, slow down or reverse his attempt to improve Franco-Soviet relations (through the president’s visit to Moscow in June 1984 and Gorbachev’s return visit to Paris in October 1985), and modify the French positions on such extra-European issues of vital interest to the United States as Central America, South Africa, and Libya. Yet these differences remain relatively marginal and, whatever happens after March 1986, the foreign policy of the French Fifth Republic will show few significant changes from the course initially set by its founder.

In sum, the UDF and the RPR are in broad agreement on the economic and social policies to be pursued by a Center-Right government after March, and even Barre’s dissenting voice does not truly affect this basic consensus. The PS is in broad agreement with the limits of its opposition to such policies, and even Rocard’s ascending voice does not truly threaten a renewed fragmentation of the party, at least until the aftermath of the presidential elections; and everyone agrees on the need to continue to work within the boundaries set by a regime that has remained steadfast while changing.

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\(^*\) The recent flap over Jaruzelski’s trip to Paris, without Fabius’s prior consultation and approval, confirmed Mitterrand’s intention to assert his authority in foreign policy over the prime minister. What is not discussed here is the form that another type of rehabilitation will take: with the PS, that is, where Rocard’s rise might split a party that will have to determine whether its future lies in a return to earlier socialist dogmas or a continued drift toward the Center-Left moderation of the past three years.