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Une Société Nouvelle: the decline of the Gaullist party and France's move to the left

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UNE SOCIÉTÉ NOUVELLE:
THE DECLINE OF THE GAULLIST PARTY
AND FRANCE'S MOVE TO THE LEFT

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of History

by
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Abstract

This thesis is concerned with French politics in the thirteen years after 1968. After the wave of street demonstrations, seizure of schools, and worker sit-ins that beset the country in May of that year, many people in France became convinced of the need to alter the political status quo. In the years that followed, the country's largest and most dominant political grouping, the Gaullist party, experienced a dramatic loss of electoral support. Between 1968 and 1981, the Gaullists lost control of the National Assembly, the premiership, and the presidency. By May 1981, France's Fifth Republic was governed by a leftist president for the first time since its founding by Charles de Gaulle twenty-three years earlier.

The purpose of this thesis is to find the reasons for the dramatic decline experienced by the Gaullist party during the 1970s. Scholars have usually argued that the turmoil of 1968, the resignation of de Gaulle one year later, and the economic downturn of the early- to mid-1970s hastened the collapse of the party. These viewpoints are inadequate. The second and third chapters of this work reveal that the failure of Gaullists to support far-reaching political, economic, and social reform alienated an important portion of their electorate and thus led to the weakening of the party as a whole. As the third chapter shows, this argument also helps to explain the victory of François Mitterrand over Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in the May 1981 presidential election.

To prove this point, this thesis examines polling data, party programs, and presidential and legislative elections held between 1968 and 1981. This work also explores the events of May 1968, Gaullist political ideology, and the realities de Gaulle's successors faced after his resignation in order to demonstrate how the refusal of the Gaullist party to rollback the state compromised their ability to dominate French politics.

Introduction

On September 17, 1970, France's minister of education, Alain Peyrefitte, delivered a ten-minute address to a group of fellow Gaullist officials. He opened the speech not with a brief description of his country's university system, its ballooning enrollment rates, its lumbering bureaucracy, or even the dim employment prospects that awaited students after graduation. Instead, Peyrefitte began with a bold prediction: "We shall remain in power for the next thirty years," he said, referring to the Gaullist party, "so long as we do nothing stupid."¹ Less than five years later, one of France's most widely read and respected newspapers, *Le Monde*, announced the "End of Gaullism."² That the Gaullists could be transformed from a party boasting of its dominance to a group of political has-beens within a span of five years reveals much about the unpredictable and occasionally erratic nature of French politics. Yet, what this juxtaposition fails to uncover is how the party that held nearly every top government post in France since 1958 suffered such a dramatic decline during the first half of the 1970s.

Most scholars have associated the weakening of the Gaullist party with the turmoil of May 1968 and the subsequent resignation of President Charles de Gaulle. Writing just three months after the crippling wave of street demonstrations, seizure of schools, and worker sit-ins that beset France, French political scientist Jean Charlot argued in an article entitled "L'après Gaullism" that the events of "May of simply demonstrated people's displeasure with de Gaulle and his party."³ Biographer Jean Lacouture echoed this assertion in 1986, claiming that the

¹ Quoted in John Hayward and Victor Wright, "Presidential Supremacy and the French General Elections of March 1973," *Parliamentary Affairs* 3 (Summer 1973), 277.

² *Le Monde*, January 1, 1975.

³ Jean Charlot, "L'après-gaullisme," *Revue Française de Science Politique* 18 (Aug. 1968), 75.

diminution of the Gaullist party “into a party like the others” was caused by May ’68.⁴ The most contemporary study to address this issue agrees. According to Andrew Knapp in his 1994 *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, the events of May and de Gaulle’s departure from politics less than a year later hastened the deterioration of the Gaullist party. “May 1968,” he argues, “defined the moment and the manner in which [the decline of the Gaullist party] was to take place.”⁵ “The UDR [*Union pour la Défense de la République*, the official name adopted by the Gaullist party] ‘label’ became less attractive to voters after 1968.”⁶

Damaged by the events of May 1968 and without its charismatic founder, the Gaullist party, claim scholars, had little chance to survive the turbulent decade of the 1970s. Political scientist Alain Lancelot insists in his 1988 study, *Les Elections sous la cinquième République*, that the energy crisis of 1973 as well as the general economic downturn suffered by almost every Western nation in the years that followed, “compelled the French to vote for candidates other than those who belonged to the UDR.”⁷ Knapp supports this position, writing, “rising inflation, monetary confusion . . . and the 1973 oil crisis all” led to a loss of electoral support for the Gaullist party.⁸ He suggests that other occurrences also hurt the UDR during the first half of the 1970s. The rash of worker strikes, he says, along with the student-led street demonstrations that occurred between 1969 and 1973, made the party appear “inept and less capable of governing

⁴ Jean Lacouture, *De Gaulle* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), 3: 636.

⁵ Andrew Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle* (Aldershot: Dartmouth Publishing, 1994), 12.

⁶ Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 247.

⁷ Alain Lancelot, *Les Elections sous la cinquième République* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988), 298.

⁸ Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 22.

effectively” in the eyes of French voters.⁹ This contention that the “external environment” of the early 1970s hastened the decline of an already weakened Gaullist party has thus far been the most thorough explanation of how *Le Monde* could announce the “End of Gaullism” less than five years after Peyrefitte predicted that his party would govern France well into the next century.

A more careful reading of French history reveals these interpretations to be inadequate. First, evidence suggests that the economic woes felt by much of the world during the 1970s did not fully affect France until after the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) placed an oil embargo on it and other Western nations in October 1973. Increased manufacturing output and a favorable balance of trade meant that while parties like the Conservatives in Great Britain were freezing prices and wages, the Gaullists were overseeing a steady economic expansion into the first months of 1974. Second, the social unrest of the early 1970s did not contribute to the UDR’s loss of support. At the same time French laborers were downing their tools for higher wages and students were taking to the streets demanding education reform, the Gaullists managed to recruit an additional 200,000 party members. Third, de Gaulle’s resignation in April 1969 appears not to have caused the collapse of the party he headed. After all, his close friend and fellow Gaullist, Georges Pompidou, had little difficulty winning the presidential election held one month later. Fourth, the turmoil of May 1968 functioned to help, not hurt, the Gaullist party. With goading from UDR officials, many people in France became convinced that radical leftists and foreign operatives had incited these events in an effort to foment full-scale revolution. Voters responded by giving the Gaullists a firmer

⁹ Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 22.

hold over the government. The party won 296 of the 495 seats in the National Assembly during the legislative elections of June 1968.

Yet, however much support the Gaullists received after 1968, the events of May persuaded many in France of the need to alter the status quo. Opinion polls conducted in June 1968 and January 1969, for instance, revealed that a majority of French men and women preferred that the government pursue “very different policies” than those of the recent past.¹⁰ Such findings made clear that many people no longer favored the highly interventionist approach to governing taken by the UDR. Since the founding of the Fifth Republic by de Gaulle in 1958, he and his party had controlled most aspects of the French state. From setting price ceilings and managing large-scale industry to determining university curricula and monitoring certain media outlets, the Gaullists ran the most comprehensive administration in the Western world. Many of the French thought May 1968 the moment at which to abandon these policies. A government-commissioned report issued in June 1969 concurred. According to its author, Simon Nora, France needed to follow the lead of countries like West Germany and adapt its economy to the “competitive climate” of post-war Europe.¹¹ Jacques Chaban-Delmas, the Gaullist prime minister from 1969 to 1972, agreed with Nora’s conclusion but believed his country required equally drastic social changes if it was to avoid more events similar to those of May ’68. He made this position clear when he unveiled a series of proposals to the Assembly on the afternoon of September 16, 1969. Labeled the *Société Nouvelle* (New Society), Chaban’s reform package included measures privatizing national industry, granting additional benefits to industrial workers, and allowing greater autonomy for universities and the media.

¹⁰ See Lancelot, *Les Elections sous la cinquième République*, 132, 151.

¹¹ John Hayward, “State Intervention in France: The Changing Style of Government-Industrial Relations,” *Political Studies* 3 (1972), 294.

France never received many of the reforms promised by Chaban. The primary antagonist of the New Society was the country's newly-elected president and leader of the Gaullist party, Pompidou. For him, there were both ideological and practical reasons to oppose the prime minister's program. The president denied, for example, that there even existed such a thing as a "society," let alone that it could be improved through reform: "There are only individuals and France," he remarked after hearing Chaban's recommendations.¹² Moreover, Pompidou feared that the New Society proposals, if implemented, would alienate a portion of the Gaullist electorate. Although the party touted itself as representing a broad cross-section of the French population, or, as UDR officials liked to claim, the "metro crowd at rush-hour," Gaullist candidates fared better among those segments of the population that objected to far-reaching political change. The president even claimed that the drastic reforms of the New Society threatened France itself. The Fifth Republic was, after all, the creation of de Gaulle, and no one could be certain of its survival after his resignation in April 1969. France, Pompidou reasoned, required political stability, not sweeping change, during the initial and uncertain months of *l'après de Gaulle* (the period immediately after de Gaulle's resignation). He thus spent much of his presidency undermining the New Society and offering instead modest economic initiatives designed to appease the increasingly restless members of the French working class.

More so than the events of May 1968, or the resignation of de Gaulle, or the economic troubles of the early- to mid-1970s, the refusal of party leaders to embrace extensive reforms such as those proposed by Chaban led to the dramatic decline of the UDR. Pompidou himself came to understand the negative impact his conservative posturing had on the party. Three months prior to the March 1973 legislative elections, he and other leading Gaullists presented

¹² Quoted in Alain Peyrefitte, *Le Mal français* (Paris: Plon, 1976), 96.

proposals that mirrored Chaban's New Society. The reason for this *volte-face* had less to do with any evolution in the president's political ideology than with alterations in France's political landscape. Unlike the Gaullists, several other parties in France had dedicated themselves to reform in the years immediately after 1968. Led by the Socialist François Mitterrand, the parties of the left closed ranks and proposed a joint political platform known as the *Programme Commun* (Common Program). At the same time, the political center rallied behind the attractive and ambitious figure of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and his calls for a less interventionist state. As chapter 2 will show, many people in France simply found the UDR's new commitment to change disingenuous if not deceptive. The result was that a sizeable portion of moderate Gaullists abandoned the party to support centrist factions like Giscard's *Républicains Indépendants* (Independent Republicans, RI) during the legislative elections of March 1973 and then Giscard himself during the presidential election held one year later.

The failure of Gaullists to endorse extensive reform also explains the continued decline experienced by the UDR during the second half of the 1970s. Having lost 113 of its 296 Assembly seats in 1973 and the presidency to Giscard in 1974, the Gaullist party possessed far less political clout than it did just a few years earlier. This fact became readily apparent when Giscard overcame near unanimous opposition from Gaullists deputies and passed initiatives lowering the voting age to eighteen, legalizing abortion, and relaxing the laws on divorce. Although the measures were meant to ease mounting tensions related to the soaring inflation and high unemployment that gripped the country, UDR officials like Prime Minister Jacques Chirac believed that the president's social reforms leaned much too far to the left. Personally offended, Chirac resigned his post and led his party in search of a new political identity. Yet the transformation of the UDR into the *Rassemblement pour la République* (Rally for the Republic,

RPR) in December 1976 was merely a change of name. The RPR recommitted itself to what Chirac termed the “Gaullist vision of the state” and successfully opposed Giscard’s efforts to enact further liberalizing reforms. Chapter 3 will reveal that the RPR’s adherence to Gaullist orthodoxy drove away much of the moderate support that had yet to abandon the party. The party that entered the 1970s all powerful, ended the decade having lost both the presidency and premiership, and controlling just 150 of the 495 seats in the National Assembly.

The Gaullists’ rejection of sweeping reform had consequences that reached well into the next decade and had implications that extended far beyond the party itself. Chapter 3 will also demonstrate that the RPR played a crucial role in determining the outcome of 1981 presidential election. Although Chirac, the lone Gaullist candidate in the field, received less than 5 million votes and failed to advance to the May 19 run-off, the actions of his party in previous years clearly damaged Giscard’s bid for reelection. By frustrating the president’s attempts to secure wide-ranging change during his final years in office, the RPR robbed Giscard of a strong reformist record and made him even more vulnerable to criticism from the media as well as the left. To be sure, the president entered the election dogged by an economy that remained sluggish and public scandals that he could not deny. Still, Giscard’s opponents focused heavily on his failure to enact significant reforms. The result was that Mitterrand, the man who had committed himself to change a decade earlier, defeated Giscard on the second ballot. The reluctance of the Gaullist party to push for far-reaching change in the years after 1968 thus contributed not only to its own decline but to the election of the Republic’s first leftist president as well. Peyrefitte’s exhortation not to do something “stupid” had clearly been ignored by members of his party. They would have to wait another fourteen years before voters allowed a Gaullist president to govern France.

Chapter 1: The Succession

The Founding Father: Charles de Gaulle

Gazing back across the historical landscape of modern France, one's eye cannot help but be drawn to the more dramatic contours of the country's violent revolutionary tradition. Even those students possessing only a modest understanding of French history will surely recognize the years 1789, 1830, and 1848 as crucial to, what is frequently, the rocky terrain of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. Yet these dates act as more than simple guideposts for the inexperienced surveyor. The upheavals of 1789, 1830, and 1848 also bring into sharp relief the social, political, and economic tensions that beset modern France during its formative years. While a comprehensive discussion of such a notion lies beyond the purview of this study, one needs only to accept what historians like Louise and Charles Tilly have long suggested: episodes of social turmoil often times throw added light onto the underlying structural changes occurring in that society.¹ Within the Great Revolution of 1789 alone, we see a France wracked by the birth pangs of capitalism, rocked by the dissolution of absolutism, and roused by the teachings of the Enlightenment.

Many observers hesitate, however, to affix the same revolutionary label to the student- and worker-led rebellion of May 1968. The recent trend in historiography has selected instead the term "events," and not "revolution," as perhaps a reflection of the fact that the street demonstrations, seizure of schools, and worker sit-ins failed to topple the existing political

¹ A vast majority of the Tillys' work is based on this hypothesis. In particular, see Charles Tilly, *Stories, Identities, and Political Change* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), Charles Tilly, *et al.*, *The Rebellious Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), and Louise Tilly, *et al.*, *Class Conflict and Collective Action* (London: Sage Publications, 1981).

regime.² Whatever its nomenclature, the events of 1968, like those of 1789, 1830, and 1848, offer a similar window onto the troubling trends that beset French society. During the eight years previous to May '68, the number of students enrolled in French schools of higher education ballooned by 300,000. Added to this influx were students' frustrations with an overburdened and unresponsive university bureaucracy, dim employment prospects for graduates, and limited access to female dormitories. The result was mass protest, first by Nanterre undergraduates under the direction of sociology student and anarchist Daniel Cohn-Bendit, and soon thereafter by thousands more students from across Paris. Their maxim, "provocation, repression, solidarity," also brought out sympathetic laborers, many of whom held jobs that paid less than 500 francs (about \$475) a month. Approximately 500,000 less fortunate workers could find no employment at all. By the end of May, some 9 million French men and women joined the Parisian students in a general strike.³

Although much of the discontent in 1968 was fueled by educational and economic uncertainties, it also represented the general disaffection felt for the president of the Fifth French Republic, Charles de Gaulle. An ideologically driven man, characterized by his Catholic piety, fierce nationalism, and unremitting ambition, de Gaulle, perhaps more than anyone, understood his exceptional role in post-World War Two politics. His reference, as he faced down the Algiers rebels of 1960, to "the national legitimacy which I have embodied for over twenty years" was, however, much more than rhetorical pomp.⁴ This belief also pervades numerous passages

² The student- and worker-led rebellion of May 1968 has been described as everything from a "crisis" to a "mess in the bed." See Keith Reader, *The May 1968 Events in France* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 23-25. I, too, will employ the word "events" when referring to May 1968.

³ For a more general history of May 1968, see Daniel Singer, *Prelude to Revolution: France in May 1968* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1970) and Alain Touraine, *The May Movement: Revolt and Reform: May 1968 – The Student Rebellion and Workers' Strikes – The Birth of a Social Movement* (New York: Random House, 1971).

⁴ Charles de Gaulle, *Discours et messages* (Paris: Plon, 1970), 2: 166.

in the two sets of his *Mémoires de guerre* and is echoed in his conversations with Minister of Culture André Malraux, as he alluded to the “contract” he believed existed between himself and the French people.⁵ His prime minister, Georges Pompidou, most accurately expressed de Gaulle’s political legitimacy in terms of both the president’s ability and charisma. “De Gaulle possessed a ‘personal coefficient,’” Pompidou claimed, “which allowed him to guide his party and his people.”⁶

De Gaulle also perceived his right to power as stemming from more tangible sources. He had not only won the *Croix de guerre* (Cross of War) for his service in the First World War, but he also played an important role in coordinating the Resistance movement against Nazi aggression twenty years later. Requesting the band to play “Le Père de la Victoire” (The Father of Victory), he marked the liberation of France in 1944, striding down the Champs-Élysées to the cheers of more than 1 million French men and women. Flowers of every shade carpeted the streets, and the unanimous chant of de Gaulle’s name boomed like the beat of a heart.⁷ De Gaulle had resuscitated the ailing capital. Even the parade route seemed to suggest that the city and the country were eager for a new beginning. Coming to the Hôtel de Ville (Paris’ city hall), where twice before leaders proclaimed from its balcony the creation of a new Republic, he recognized the decision that lay before him. Whispering to an aide, he insisted, “The Republic has never ceased to exist . . . Why should I proclaim it?”⁸ Without hesitation, he passed the

⁵ Charles de Gaulle, *Mémoires de guerre* (Paris: Plon, 1956), 2: 364; André Malraux, *Les Chênes qu’on abat* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 27-28.

⁶ Georges Pompidou, *Le Noeud gordien* (Paris: Flammarion, 1974), 65. De Gaulle’s political legitimacy will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

⁷ For details on the procession, see Lacouture, *De Gaulle*, 1: 833-35.

⁸ Quoted in Lacouture, *De Gaulle*, 1: 834.

Hôtel de Ville and moved onto the Cathedral of Notre-Dame. Gunfire from the few-remaining German snipers echoed against the face of the church as he approached its doors. Unmoved, de Gaulle entered, calmly stood through the service, and joined in the singing of the “Magnificat.” “For he that is mighty hath magnified me,” it goes, “and holy is his name.”⁹

But the euphoric feelings of liberation did not automatically endear de Gaulle to the French people. “Charles should not think,” wrote a fellow Resistance leader in June 1944, “that he is waited for like the Messiah. Certainly, he will be well received . . . but his credit is not unlimited.”¹⁰ After a brief turn as head of the country’s provisional government, and then as organizer of the *Rassemblement du peuple français* (Rally of the French People, RPF), de Gaulle discovered his credit spent, and he resigned his post in January 1946. Several factors hastened this decision, but none were more important than the return home of the government officials who participated in the final days of the Third Republic. Deported and imprisoned by the occupying Nazi forces, these men reestablished their previous political factions and stood firmly against de Gaulle’s own desire to institute a strong presidency confirmed by plebiscite. His refusal to compromise with the increasingly powerful “old parties” pushed de Gaulle to the sidelines, where, says historian Charles Williams, he waited “in the firm belief that it would all end in tears.”¹¹

When the tears did come twelve years later, it was, indeed, de Gaulle who comforted the anxious nation. Still smarting from a humiliating military defeated in Indochina, the Parisian government summoned de Gaulle in 1958 as the only national figure capable of preventing

⁹ See Charles Williams, *The Last Great Frenchman: The Life of General De Gaulle* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1993), 273-75.

¹⁰ Quoted in Lacouture, *De Gaulle*, 1: 731.

¹¹ Williams, *The Last Great Frenchman*, 306.

mutiny and civil war in French Algeria. Since the last decades of the nineteenth century, bitter animosity had existed between the French settlers residing in the African country and those who demanded national independence. By May 1958, however, the situation assumed a new dynamic, as a number of French military leaders joined with the more militant civilians in an attempted *putsch* against the nationalists, who sought to establish a sovereign Algerian government. On June 1, the French National Assembly designated de Gaulle prime minister and accorded him emergency powers to cope with the crisis. “It would have been vastly preferable,” de Gaulle believed, “for my return to have been achieved by the normal means. Tell [my political opposition] . . . it is for the good of France.”¹² Wearing his uniform of brigadier-general, he spoke to France in a televised broadcast two months later and asked for the support of all French citizens in establishing an “Algerian Algeria.” This appeal laid the groundwork for the peaceful resolution of the conflict and the creation of an independent Algerian state. Meanwhile, voters approved of de Gaulle’s self-tailored constitution, which made him the first president of the Fifth French Republic.

De Gaulle looked as much to future as he did the past when establishing the new government. In an effort to avoid the ministerial instability that plagued France’s Third (1870-1940) and Fourth (1944-1958) Republics, he enhanced his own powers as president at the expense of the National Assembly. For instance, de Gaulle inserted clauses into the new constitution limiting sessions of the Assembly to five-month intervals. Deputies thus had less opportunity to challenge the decisions of the executive. The 1958 constitution also gave de Gaulle the authority to dissolve the Assembly one year after its election. Presidents of past regimes could exercise this right only after the collapse of two successive governments.

¹² Quoted in Lacouture, *De Gaulle*, 2: 480-81.

De Gaulle even reduced much of the influence deputies exerted over the policy-making process. Under the Third and Fourth Republics, the constitution allowed members of the Assembly freedom to enact legislation relating to any subject. The executive, on the other hand, was confined to matters expressly designated it by the National Assembly. The inability of a divided Assembly during the crisis-ridden years of both Republics convinced de Gaulle of the need to invert this relationship. The 1958 constitution, therefore, specified a narrow legislative “domain” for deputies, leaving many of the major policy decisions to the president and his prime minister.¹³

Having consolidated his power as president, de Gaulle thereafter focused on restructuring the French political system. In the fall of 1962, he sponsored a referendum that approved an amendment to the constitution specifying the election of the president by direct popular vote. Although opposition abounded – the president of the Senate, Gaston Monnerville, told voters that universal suffrage would produce “enlightened Bonapartism” – the referendum passed with 62 percent of the vote.¹⁴ Three weeks later, de Gaulle gave a televised address to the French people. Under the threat of resignation, he demanded that his party, the *Union pour la nouvelle république* (Union for the New Republic, UNR), have a clear majority in the Assembly. The electorate responded to his appeal by giving the UNR 229 of the 465 seats. The legislative elections of November 1962 also diminished the power of de Gaulle’s strongest opponents, especially those on the left. Only the Socialist François Mitterrand retained his seat. De Gaulle appointed Pompidou to the office of prime minister and in 1965 was returned to the Elysée (the

¹³ For details on the 1958 constitution, see Nicolas Wahl, *The Fifth Republic: France’s New Political System* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 31-44.

¹⁴ Quoted in Lacouture, *De Gaulle*, 3: 581.

presidential palace) for seven more years as president of France. At the age of seventy-five, said one observer, “de Gaulle had finally come into his kingdom.”¹⁵

Naturally, de Gaulle took great pains to ensure his kingdom’s success, and no kingdom could be successful, he believed, without the state assuming the lead role. “The state’s task,” he exhorted in his *Mémoires d’espoir*, “consists not in placing the nation’s forces in a yoke, but in guiding its development and ensuring its permanence.”¹⁶ Such sentiments had long been popular in France, especially after World War Two when leaders relied increasingly on the state to promote economic growth and social stability. De Gaulle continued this trend after becoming president. For instance, he supported the nationalization of France’s largest industries, including steel, coal, and electricity. He followed earlier policies regulating credit, prices, and interest rates to encourage consumer spending. Many aspects of the education system also continued to be administered by the state after the collapse of the Fourth Republic. Under de Gaulle, the minister of education remained in control of curriculum requirements and enrollment quotas for France’s schools and universities. The president even refused demands to diminish the government’s hold over radio and television. In fact, so closely did the government monitor the two media outlets that on the desk of minister of information sat a series of buttons allowing him to summon broadcast directors at a moments notice.¹⁷

De Gaulle took as much care when securing his kingdom’s position abroad. Of course, all countries were potential enemies of France, but none more than United States and the Soviet Union. For de Gaulle, the Cold War froze what would have otherwise been a fluid system of

¹⁵ Williams, *The Last Great Frenchman*, 423.

¹⁶ Charles de Gaulle, *Mémoires d’espoir* (Paris: Plon, 1970), 163.

¹⁷ See Philip Thody, *The Fifth French Republic: Presidents, Politics, and Personalities* (London: Routledge, 1998), 79. More will be discussed regarding the role of the state under de Gaulle in chapter 2.

international relations. “The division of the world between two superpowers . . . does not benefit the liberty, equality, and fraternity of peoples. A different order,” he believed, “[was] necessary for peace.”¹⁸ Achieving this different order required that de Gaulle’s France be able to exercise self-determination when and where necessary. As he told the graduating class at the *Ecole militaire* in 1959, France needed “a force capable of acting exclusively on its behalf, a force that is . . . capable of deployment anywhere at anytime.”¹⁹ Six years later, following the creation of the country’s first atomic bomb and a sophisticated missile delivery system, de Gaulle had his wish: nuclear deterrence was now his country’s chief diplomatic tool. “A man and a people can only die once,” he coolly remarked to an aide, “provided that one has the means to wound the possible aggressor mortally.”²⁰

But the threat of force alone did not liberate France from what he perceived as the trappings of the Cold War. Creating a “different order” also meant that France had to operate independently of the United States. De Gaulle made his intentions clear in the first months of 1964. After formally recognizing communist China in January, he personally toured Latin America on two separate occasions. He then made an official state visit to Moscow, where he expressed his desire to forge a “new alliance” between France and the Soviet Union.²¹ De Gaulle’s desire to hold the United States at arms length became more apparent later in the year when he withdrew all French forces from the American-dominated North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Even France’s closest ally at the time, Great Britain, suffered from de

¹⁸ Quoted in Edward Kolodziej, *French International Policy Under de Gaulle and Pompidou: Politics of Grandeur* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 46.

¹⁹ Quoted in Kolodziej, *French International Policy*, 102.

²⁰ Quoted in Kolodziej, *French International Policy*, 102.

²¹ For details, see Kolodziej, *French International Policy*, 245-56.

Gaulle's foreign policy initiatives. He criticized the British government for placing their nuclear forces under NATO multilateral command, claiming that the move allowed the United States to determine, at least in part, how the defense of Europe would be conducted. He even went so far as to veto Great Britain's application for membership to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1967. Just as he did four years earlier, de Gaulle based his decision on the belief that Britain would act as a "Trojan horse" for the United States and would threaten the "feeling of solidarity" that characterized the EEC.²²

To be sure, de Gaulle's politics were as much a reflection of France's place in the world as they were of his own personality. Both exhibited a strange blend of pride and paranoia that compelled many of de Gaulle's contemporaries to see him as a tragically heroic figure, a man whom the world should at once fear and admire. United States President Lyndon Johnson probably put this sentiment best when he jokingly remarked, "When de Gaulle winds up to pitch, I step out of the batter's box."²³ The French president may have not been a charming figure and he certainly lacked the quick wit of someone like Johnson. Still, he rarely missed an opportunity to make others laugh. He frequently likened President Johnson's facial features to those of the cartoon character Popeye. At times, he also took to performing the role of a mythical creature he called "de Gaulle," who, amongst family members, acted more oafish than eloquent. The president was even said to have invented several personal anecdotes, including the one he recounted to the first lady of the United States, Jackie Kennedy. "You know," he said with a grin, "my mother came from an old French family. Mine is old, too."²⁴

²² Quoted in Kolodziej, *French International Policy*, 221.

²³ Quoted in Don Cook, *Charles de Gaulle* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1984), 368.

²⁴ The short anecdote that de Gaulle told to Jackie Kennedy is recounted in Thody, *The Fifth French Republic*, 32.

Despite his jesting, de Gaulle never felt completely at ease. Standing almost six and one half feet with a deeply lined face, failing eyesight, and a slight stoop, he increasingly found himself conscious of his physical oddities. His gangling walk, large nose, protruding ears, and receding chin had always made him feel awkward and shy. “I practically never look at myself in the mirror,” he admitted to his wife, “unless I have to . . . for instance just before a television appearance.”²⁵ Nor was he any happier about his height. As he realized during his triumphal march down the Champs-Élysées in August 1944, “I myself had neither the physique nor the taste for those attitudes and gestures that can charm the public.”²⁶ Besides, he found it difficult to get in and out of cars, and most beds were too small for him. “We people are never quite at our ease,” he told an assistant one day, adding with a smirk, “I mean . . . giants. The chairs are always too small, the tables too low, the impression one makes too strong.”²⁷

Strong impressions also gave this man from the bourgeois section of Lille the sort of presence in French politics that few had ever possessed. His moniker “tall Charles” was, indeed, as much a reflection of his imposing figure as it was of the personal authority he exuded. A dinner guest recalled, “When he was in the room it was almost impossible to look at anybody else.”²⁸ “The door opened abruptly,” said another admiring visitor, remembering her first encounter with the French president, “and the symbol entered the room.”²⁹ Yet, de Gaulle was much more than just an icon. Moving beyond the height and the uniform, he had a natural slowness of gesture that was at once reassuring and intimidating. “He dominated things and

²⁵ Quoted in Robert Lassus, *Le Mari de Madame de Gaulle*, (Paris: Lattès, 1990), 108.

²⁶ De Gaulle, *Mémoires d'espoir*, 131.

²⁷ Quoted in Louis Joxe, *Victoires sur la nuit*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1981), 144.

²⁸ Quoted in Williams, *The Last Great Frenchman*, 345.

²⁹ Quoted in Jean Charlot, *The Gaullist Phenomenon: The Gaullist Movement in the Fifth Republic* (London: Ruskin House, 1971), 163.

people,” said an observer, “he did not discuss, he imposed.”³⁰ “Without a word,” Christian Pineau recounted, when speaking of his meeting with de Gaulle in 1942, “he led me to an armchair, gestured me to sit down, pushed a box full of cigars towards me, sat down himself, leant back in his chair, then looking at me straight in the eyes, pronounced his first words, ‘Now speak to me of France.’”³¹

By the eve of 1968, the majority of the French electorate could probably raise few objections to de Gaulle’s Liberation Day overture, “I am France.” Even after May of that year, when students chanted “Ten years, that’s enough!” and he retreated to Baden-Baden, Germany, de Gaulle’s grip on the presidency and the country seemed undeniable. Following the dissolution of the National Assembly, his party – renamed the *Union pour la Défense de la République* (Union for the Defense of the Republic, UDR) – won a crushing victory at the end of June with over 10 million votes and earning three of five seats in the Assembly.³² With a little more than 20 percent of the ballots, the political left (Communists, Socialists, and Radicals) reached its electoral nadir for the postwar period. Using a piquant allusion to the fall of Maximilien Robespierre and the end of the Terror, the Parisian daily *Le Monde* described June 1968 as “Thermidor at the polls.”³³ Unlike Robespierre, de Gaulle emerged from his Thermidor with his rule – and his head – still intact.

One must be careful, however, not simply to view the June 1968 legislative elections as an indisputable victory for de Gaulle. His defeat in the referendum on “participation” just nine months later suggests that the charismatic “contract” between the president and the French

³⁰ Quoted in Charlot, *The Gaullist Phenomenon*, 164.

³¹ Quoted in Christian Pineau, *La Simple vérité: 1940-1945* (Paris: Julliard, 1960), 157.

³² For election results, see *Le Monde*, July 21, 1968.

³³ Quoted in *Le Monde*, July 24, 1968.

people no longer existed.³⁴ Like his many previous referenda, attached to de Gaulle's April 1969 plebiscite were two questions. First, of course, was the formal object of the referendum itself. But there also existed a more implicit question, which in essence asked, "do you wish de Gaulle to remain or do you seek the chaos of the Fourth Republic?"³⁵ Clearly, the events of May '68 invalidated such a binary, as they demonstrated that social and political turmoil could exist under de Gaulle. The overwhelming victory for the UDR in the June legislative elections, therefore, should be understood as an indicator of voters' displeasure with the student revolt, worker strikes, and the left. Losing the referendum by 6 percentage points, de Gaulle, always acutely sensitive to the desires of the electorate, released a press statement at ten past midnight on Monday, April 28: "I am ceasing to exercise my functions as President of the Republic. This decision takes effect at midday today."³⁶ With that terse announcement, de Gaulle vacated his office and returned to his provincial home in Colombey-les-deux-Eglises to work on his memoirs in self-imposed exile. He died there of a heart attack less than two years later.³⁷

The Successor: Georges Pompidou

While many observers have correctly linked de Gaulle's departure from politics to the events of 1968, just as many have also argued that the turmoil of May hastened the decline of the

³⁴ De Gaulle even acknowledged that his "contract" with the people had been "broken" long before May 1968. See Malraux, *Les Chênes qu'on abat*, 27, for details; De Gaulle's own conception of "participation" remained ambiguous, even up to the day of the referendum. In March, de Gaulle proclaimed that this idea represented the devolution of power to the regions that would constitute the future strength of France. At his press conference of September 9, on the other hand, he defined "participation" as the middle-way between capitalism and socialism, designed to abolish the class war by bringing workers into the management of institutions and companies. By December, "participation" was spoken of, according to one of de Gaulle's ministers, as simply modifying key institutions. See Williams, *The Last Great Frenchman*, 481-82, for details.

³⁵ For information on de Gaulle's many referenda, see Knapp, *Gaullism since De Gaulle*, 18-20.

³⁶ Quoted in *Le Monde*, April 29, 1969.

Gaullist party as well. Even immediately following May '68, commentators anticipated the demise of the UDR. In August of that year, the prolific French political scientist Jean Charlot claimed in his aptly-titled article "L'après gaullisme" (the post-Gaullist era) that de Gaulle's failure to win an absolute majority on the first ballot in the 1965 presidential election dealt an "irreparable blow" to his presidency. "May," he added, "had simply demonstrated people's displeasure with de Gaulle and his party."³⁸ Jean Lacouture echoed this assertion in 1986, saying that the diminution of the UDR into a "party like the others" first occurred in May 1968.³⁹ Perhaps the most thorough treatment of this topic, though, belongs to Andrew Knapp. Writing in 1994, Knapp bases much of his *Gaullism since de Gaulle* on the notion that de Gaulle's resignation – due both to the 1965 election and to the events three years later – occasioned the deterioration of the Gaullist Party. "May 1968," he states, "defined the moment and the manner in which [the decline of the UDR] was to take place."⁴⁰

Such conclusions highlight what continues to be a serious flaw in the historiography of de Gaulle's political career and of the Gaullist party. Essential to gaining a definite understanding of the French president is the idea that he and the party that he headed were not inextricably linked. De Gaulle himself suggested that a clear separation existed between himself and the UDR, exulting, "To govern through a party, Napoleon once said, is to become dependent on it sooner or later. I will not be caught in that."⁴¹ Throughout the 1960s, de Gaulle did indeed adhere to Napoleon's words. He not only refused to attend a single Gaullist party function during his eleven years as president, but he also refrained from specifically endorsing UDR

³⁸ Charlot, "L'après-gaullisme," 75.

³⁹ Lacouture, *De Gaulle*, 3: 636.

⁴⁰ Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 12.

⁴¹ Quoted in Frank Wilson, "Gaullism without de Gaulle," *The Western Political Quarterly* 26 (Sept. 1973): 494.

candidates for the Assembly. In fact, when there were no electoral considerations, he refused to mention the party by name in public. Even during May 1968, when he nearly lost his hold of the presidency, he chose not to enlist the assistance of what was clearly a powerful party apparatus. Instead, he appealed for general public support and depended on the spontaneously organized “committees for the defense of the Republic” to shore up confidence in his regime.⁴² A reviewer commenting on the absence of the very word “Gaullist” in de Gaulle’s 1970 *Mémoires d’espoir* expressed the subservient role of the UDR by facetiously remarking, “the party might as well not have existed after the 1962 general election.”⁴³

French voters also clearly distinguished between the man and the party, as evidenced by the legislative elections of June 1968. True to form, de Gaulle remained aloof from the campaign. His only public statement regarding the election came on the eve of the second ballot when he stated equivocally that “participation [would be] the rule and the strength of a renewed France.”⁴⁴ The party won 296 of the 495 seats – a wider margin of seats and a higher proportion of votes on the second ballot than had ever been achieved in any French parliamentary election.⁴⁵ Just two years earlier, the UDR could only muster a scant 177 seats, and then only in alliance with the more left-leaning wing of the Gaullist party, the *Union démocratique du travail* (Democratic Union of Work, UDT). The outcome of June 1968 legislative elections, however, did not enliven de Gaulle, who dismissed the new Assembly members as “a chamber of panic,” and was irritated by the fact that a recent poll revealed that 55 percent of the electorate viewed

⁴² Details on the 1965 presidential election and de Gaulle’s loose party ties can be found in Roger-Gerard Schwartzenberger, *La Campagne présidentielle de 1965* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967), 24-38.

⁴³ Quoted in *Le Monde*, September 7, 1970.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Williams, *The Last Great Frenchman*, 471.

⁴⁵ For election results, see *Le Monde*, July 2, 1968.

him as an unpopular figure.⁴⁶ Coupling these findings with de Gaulle's failed referendum just nine months later makes it evident that by 1968 the president and his party were headed in opposite directions.

Adding further credence to this assertion is the subsequent political success of de Gaulle's long-time prime minister, Georges Pompidou. Avowedly a "profound Gaullist," this man with thick, upturned eyebrows, thinning hair, and an average build, hailed from provincial Montboudif in the country's mid-section.⁴⁷ But Pompidou's unassuming figure and bucolic birthplace were not indicative of his political capacity, for he had, what one commentator has called, "sharpened claws with a velvet paw."⁴⁸ His unique ability to approach even the most difficult situations with a "misleadingly laid-back attitude" often times afforded Pompidou the political leverage necessary to rally supporters, co-opt dissidents, and crush opponents.⁴⁹ Although admittedly steered by a Gaullist rudder, he was not simply a creature of his friend and collaborator. He proved more flexible in his politics than the sometimes temperamental and occasionally high-minded de Gaulle. Pompidou drew instead more from the academic training he received in classical languages at the prestigious *Ecole normale supérieure* and political science at the *Ecole libre des sciences politiques*.⁵⁰

After spending four years as a *lycée* professor and another five in the French military service, Pompidou joined de Gaulle's staff in 1946. That year he accepted an appointment to the

⁴⁶ Quoted in Williams, *The Last Great Frenchman*, 471. This poll was released by *Le Monde*, August 23, 1968.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Philippe Alexandre, *The Duel: De Gaulle and Pompidou* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 202.

⁴⁸ Alexandre, *The Duel*, 179.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Thody, *The Fifth French Republic*, 43.

⁵⁰ For more on Pompidou's education, see Eric Roussel, *Georges Pompidou* (Paris: Lattès, 1984), 12-23.

French court of appeal for administrative law, the *Conseil d'état*. Despite his lack of experience in jurisprudence, he quickly earned de Gaulle's respect. In fact, so impressed was de Gaulle, he requested that Pompidou assume added responsibilities outside the government. At the same time he sat on the *Conseil d'état*, Pompidou lectured on political science at the *Institut d'études politiques*, and, in 1953, he began negotiations with the Plon publishing house to print the three volumes of de Gaulle's *Mémoires de guerre*. He even accepted the chief bookkeeping duties of the *Fondation Anne de Gaulle* – an organization named after de Gaulle's daughter, who suffered from Down's syndrome – strengthening his position within the cabinet and earning him the esteem and friendship of de Gaulle's wife, Yvonne. At this point too, many observers suggest, the near fraternal bond between Pompidou and de Gaulle first developed. The two men would remain close until de Gaulle's death in 1970.⁵¹

Refusing a government position following de Gaulle's dissolution of the RPF in 1953, Pompidou accepted employment with the Rothschild bank and within a year became its chief director. The prestige of this post, combined with his years of government work, allowed him to convince de Gaulle to launch a new, devalued franc in January 1959. Soon after, Pompidou again joined de Gaulle's new government to serve as chief negotiator with the *Front de libération nationale* (Front for National Liberation, FLN). A group of militant Algerians, the FLN employed guerilla tactics against the French Army, white settlers, and moderate Muslims living in Algeria during the early 1950s. While Pompidou's lack diplomatic inexperience initially aroused hostility among many Gaullists, his efforts proved successful. His appeals jump-started the stalled peace talks with FLN, and he persuaded the organization to reconvene at Evian in the spring of 1961. True, Gaullist Louis Joxe led the final negotiations, but Pompidou

⁵¹ For details on the early relationship between de Gaulle and Pompidou, see Williams, *The Last Great Frenchman*, 261-345 and Roussel, *Georges Pompidou*, 32-75.

played an indispensable role. As the private advisor in whom de Gaulle clearly vested the most confidence, he insisted at the time of the military *putsch* in 1962 that the president deliver the crucial speech that ultimately diffused the situation.⁵²

Less than one year later, de Gaulle used Article Eight of the 1958 constitution to dismiss his current prime minister, Michel Debré, and appoint Pompidou to the premiership. Often times overshadowed by the Algerian crisis, de Gaulle's 1965 election, and the events of 1968, Pompidou's six years as French prime minister were politically fruitful ones. He became a convincing parliamentary orator and director, helping to transform the cliquish UNR into a broad-based party. He also proved himself as an able election manager. In the 1965 election, Pompidou enlivened de Gaulle's sagging campaign by encouraging the president that victory would be his in the second round. Perhaps the most crucial aspect of Pompidou's premiership that requires discussion, however, is his personal conception of the office. Like de Gaulle, he believed the prime minister should act as the mouthpiece for the president, allowing the executive to make all major decisions.⁵³ Although he never supported de Gaulle's 1967 veto blocking British entry into EEC, for example, he made no public protest.⁵⁴ This expression of filial devotion would be Pompidou's last, however, as the events of the next year compelled him to act independently of the president.

Awakened by a close aide at 5:30 A.M. on the morning of May 11, 1968, de Gaulle received a brief account of the events that transpired while he slept. The night of May 10, referred to now as "the night of barricades," witnessed nearly ten hours of street fighting between

⁵² For more on de Gaulle's speech, see Williams, *The Last Great Frenchman*, 405.

⁵³ For Pompidou's conception of the prime minister's role, see his, *Le Noeud gordien*, 61-66.

⁵⁴ For details regarding Pompidou's view of Britain's entry into the EEC, see Thody, *The Fifth French Republic*, 63-64.

student demonstrators and paramilitary police. Before the president could even take his customary morning tea, 370 demonstrators were injured, 500 were arrested, and more than 100 cars were scorched. The mess would undoubtedly take days to clean up, and relations between the police and the people of Paris had been seriously – if not permanently – damaged. Louis Joxe suggested reopening the Sorbonne, which had been closed for the last week due to its occupation by Daniel Cohn-Bendit and other university students. De Gaulle brusquely disagreed. He chose instead to wait for Prime Minister Pompidou, who was returning from a diplomatic trip to Afghanistan later that afternoon.

By the time Pompidou first contacted de Gaulle at 2:00 P.M., the students' revolt had assumed an entirely new dimension. Radio reports described in detail the brutal police tactics of the night before, and, as Joxe informed the president, public opinion had been deeply offended. France's largest trade union, the *Confédération Générale de Travail* (General Confederation of Work, CGT), could no longer deny their support to the striking students – their members would simply not allow them. Besides, if there ever existed an opportunity to attack a visibly shaken government and secure large wage increases, early May 1968 was it. The CGT called a one-day general strike for the following Monday, May 13. What had been a confrontation between the forces of order and some unruly students had, by mid-month, become a full-scale war between de Gaulle's government and 9 million French workers.

Pompidou attempted to curb the crisis over the next week. De Gaulle continued to favor the armed evacuation of the Sorbonne and considered barring a student- and worker-led march scheduled to take place that Wednesday from Denfert-Rochereau to the Latin Quarter. Fearful of the violence and possible casualties that would certainly result from an attempt to obstruct a march by some 200,000 demonstrators, the prime minister offered a more moderate solution. He

persuaded both his ministerial colleagues and the president to allow the demonstration to occur and convinced them to reopen the Sorbonne. The peace lasted just long enough for de Gaulle to fulfill a prior obligation he made to the Romanian president, Nicolae Ceausescu. He left the tenuous situation at home and boarded a plane for Bucharest on the morning of May 14. The president instructed Pompidou to douse any remaining flames in his absence.

Shortly after the president's departure, the French National Assembly initiated a raucous debate in which some members pressed for the immediate resignation of the government. Pompidou responded with what some observers have described as the finest speech of his long career. Refusing to condemn Parisian students, he pointed out that it was not the sons and daughters of the working class who were leading the rebellion or who were even involved in it. What he called, in a direct allusion to his own family background, "the young people of the working class and peasantry who know what a loaf of bread costs" had so far chosen not to participate. He also expressed sympathy for the students. The "breakdown of traditional society" and the "disappearance of its values," he claimed, had pushed "the best and most sensitive" students into the streets.⁵⁵ The prime minister went on to ensure his colleagues that order would be maintained and that he and de Gaulle remained determined to prevent any further violence. The speech served as a general diagnosis of the crisis and demonstrated the prime minister's readiness for further negotiation, a key tool that would help bring the events to a close three weeks later.

On the following day, a Communist-led demonstration of over 250,000 marchers flooded the *Place de la République*. Echoing the sentiments expressed by deputies the previous night, the demonstrators demanded that de Gaulle resign, exclaiming, "Ten years, that's enough!" and

⁵⁵ Quoted in *Le Monde*, May 16, 1968.

“De Gaulle to the Museum!” The president cut short his stay in Romania after receiving news of the protest.⁵⁶ Upon his arrival at the Orly airport in Paris, he berated his staff, including Pompidou, for allowing “in five days, ten years of struggle against idiocy to be lost.”⁵⁷ He wanted all student-occupied locations evacuated by the next day and tighter controls to be placed on radio and television reports that were sympathetic to demonstrators. De Gaulle then turned to his staff-member, Georges Gorse, and told him that he would not tolerate further disorder. “Reform, yes,” he exclaimed sternly. “Mess in the bed, no.”⁵⁸ By the time his entourage arrived at the Elysée, de Gaulle decided that only a televised appeal to the nation could stem the renewed animosities of protestors.

The broadcast of May 24 did not at all meet de Gaulle’s expectations. The president appeared as though he did belong beside museum relics, looking outdated, tired, and wounded. He reaffirmed the state’s rights to enforce the law and ensure public order, but the man who proudly proclaimed three decades earlier “I am France,” now lacked the same conviction. Even his promise to put forward referendum on “participation” in upcoming weeks seemed of little importance. De Gaulle acknowledged his weak performance later that evening, claiming, “I missed the target.”⁵⁹ His mood grew more somber by the next morning. He appeared, in the words of one of his ministers, “prostrate – stooped and aged.”⁶⁰ Following a brief conversation with the president in his study, another aide characterized him as having “no ‘feel’ for the

⁵⁶ Quoted in Philippe Alexandre, *L’Elysée en peril* (Paris: Fayard, 1969), 299.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Lacouture, *De Gaulle*, 3: 681.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Williams, *The Last Great Frenchman*, 463.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Lacouture, *De Gaulle*, 3: 686.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Lacouture, *De Gaulle*, 3: 688.

future.”⁶¹ De Gaulle then sent for his son, Philippe, who found his father fatigued and noted that he had hardly slept. Philippe suggested that his father might make for the Atlantic port of Brest – as de Gaulle had done just prior to the Nazi victory in 1940 – but was told by the president that he would not give up.⁶²

After a public confrontation left Yvonne de Gaulle in a state of near-collapse, the president resolved to leave the country.⁶³ Although he took his family east to Baden-Baden, Germany, not west to the French coast, de Gaulle again left Pompidou to control the situation in Paris. Just before departing, however, de Gaulle attempted to assuage the anxieties his prime minister surely felt. “I am old” he solemnly remarked, but “you are young. It is you who are the future. You would be the one to hold the fort. But I am telling you: I will come back.”⁶⁴ As if acknowledging that Pompidou would undoubtedly have to face an unfriendly opposition in the coming days, the president then added, “I love you.”⁶⁵ The statement was, as Pompidou acknowledged afterwards, quite out of character for de Gaulle, and no one could know what exactly would happen next.

Pompidou did face a hostile opposition during de Gaulle’s absence. In a thirty-six-hour negotiation marathon, he quelled the complaints of union leaders by granting them increased pay, added social security benefits, and a minimum wage that stood 35 percent higher than any in

⁶¹ Quoted in Williams, *The Last Great Frenchman*, 464.

⁶² See Williams, *The Last Great Frenchman*, 465.

⁶³ The event that pushed Yvonne de Gaulle to a near breakdown occurred while she was out shopping at the *Place de la Madeleine*. She had been stopped by a passing motorist and then shouted at by a group of shop assistants who claimed that she “slandered” them. At dinner that evening she broke down, complaining bitterly, not only about the incident, but also about the situation faced by her son and grandchildren, who had to cross a hostile picket line every time they went in or out of their house.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Williams, *The Last Great Frenchman*, 468.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Williams, *The Last Great Frenchman*, 469.

the country's history. But Pompidou's concessions did more than just halt Communist and CGT demonstrations: they also prompted Gaullist party members and voters to organize a rally in support of the Republic. De Gaulle returned just hours before the May 30 gathering in time to stamp the authority of legitimacy on their efforts. Now he did so with a voice of confidence and authority. At 4:30 P.M., he made a radio address confirming that he would not resign, nor would he appoint a new prime minister. He then announced the crucial words written into the text only upon Pompidou's insistence: "I am today dissolving the National Assembly."⁶⁶ Finally, in the face of what he called the Communist "threat," he declared that the Republic would not abdicate, and that he, de Gaulle, would not go.⁶⁷ Just two hours later, more than 500,000 Parisians marched in the streets for the preservation of the Fifth Republic. Although the battle was over, it was to be de Gaulle's last.

While the legislative elections of June 1968 proved an undeniable success for Gaullists, they were nothing more than a reaction to the recent chaos, as even de Gaulle himself noted with his "chamber of panic" remark.⁶⁸ To assume that de Gaulle's failure in the referendum held following year coincided with a weakening of the UDR, however, would be incorrect. In fact, just the opposite occurred. The clearest indication that the UDR party continued to enjoy immense popularity after the events of May would come just weeks after the resignation of de Gaulle during the 1969 presidential election. As is typical of French politics, a broad spectrum of candidates, representing an even broader spectrum of ideologies, campaigned to succeed the

⁶⁶ Quoted in *Le Monde*, May 31, 1968.

⁶⁷ Quoted in *Le Monde*, May 31, 1968.

⁶⁸ The assertion that the 1968 legislative elections were, as *Le Monde* suggested, "Thermidor at the polls," is generally supported by historians. See Françoise Gougel, "Les élections législatives des 23 et 30 juin 1968," *Revue Française de Science Politique* 18 (Oct. 1968): 837-58, and David Goldey, "The French Legislative Election of 23 and 30 June 1968," *Parliamentary Affairs* 22 (Spring 1969): 48-67.

president. But none seemed as viable as Pompidou, the man de Gaulle informed in June 1968 would have to “hold down the fort” in his absence. The permanence of de Gaulle’s absence gave his words a new meaning. The election of 1969 became Pompidou’s opportunity to “hold down the fort” again, and, as he did in May ’68, he did not disappoint.

Being a “profound Gaullist” Pompidou naturally intended not to stray far from the path laid out by de Gaulle. “Gaullism,” he said just months before the election, “guides me and determines my actions.”⁶⁹ Pompidou also possessed a pragmatic side. “I do not intend to be just like de Gaulle,” he vowed to a *Newsweek* reporter. “De Gaulle was a man of rare ability, I am just an economist.”⁷⁰ All modesty aside, Pompidou knew that he needed to distance himself from the former president. He therefore chose a campaign strategy that merged his Gaullist ideology with the realities of a post-1968 France. On one hand, his pledge of “continuity” assured voters that the institutions of the Republic, or the “great lines” as Pompidou called them, would remain safe. De Gaulle was, after all, the midwife of the Fifth Republic, and it remained to be seen whether his 1958 constitution – and hence the Republic itself – could survive his departure. Pompidou’s other exhortation of the 1969 election came in the form of “opening.” Admittedly more ambiguous, this phrase, said Pompidou, meant that those institutions would be open to newcomers and their ideas. He expressed his vision for France in a brief press conference five days before the election. “It is desirable and even essential that all political groups . . . should from now on direct their activity within the framework of our institutions. There will, in the future, be changes,” he pledged. “But in no event will this call into question the regime or lead to a crisis within the regime.” A reporter then asked him to outline his chief

⁶⁹ Quoted in *Le Monde*, March 10, 1969.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Charlot, *The Gaullist Phenomenon*, 203.

political goal. In a commanding voice and without hesitation, the usually reserved man from provincial France offered an unambiguous response: “We must do everything to preserve the Fifth Republic!”⁷¹

Pompidou’s vision of “continuity” and “opening” evidently resonated with the electorate, for he earned just under half of the 22 million votes cast on the first day of the election. Yet because he, like de Gaulle in 1965, failed to receive a majority, a second ballot was necessary to determine the winner. The election held on June 15 resulted in a landslide for Pompidou, who defeated his opponent, Senate president Alain Poher, by 16 percentage points.⁷² He thus won by a wider margin than any other high-ranking official, including de Gaulle, since the first election of the president was decided by universal suffrage in 1965. Told of his victory, Pompidou could not help but think of his friend sitting at home in Colombey. “General de Gaulle,” he supposed, “must be congratulating himself this evening that France has not chosen the path of impotence and of a return to the past.”⁷³ “For every personal and patriotic reason,” de Gaulle cabled back, “I send you my cordial congratulations.”⁷⁴

Congratulations were certainly in order for Pompidou, who ensured that the UDR retained the presidency and the premiership. Furthermore, the election afforded Gaullists an enviable hold on the commanding heights of the civil service and nationalized industry, and – until 1973 – an unchallenged position in the Assembly. Of even greater importance, though, the 1969 election confirmed what one observer has termed the “nationalization” of the Gaullist

⁷¹ Quoted in *Le Monde*, June 12, 1969.

⁷² For the results of the election, see *Le Monde*, June 16, 1969.

⁷³ Quoted in Lacouture, *De Gaulle*, 3: 764.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Lacouture, *De Gaulle*, 3: 764.

party.⁷⁵ Pompidou drew support not only from UDR strongholds like the urban centers, the industrial north and east, and the Catholic west, but also from the once Radical regions of southern France. By 1973, it was true that the Gaullists displayed “no great weakness,” as local UDR parties were organized in all the departments.⁷⁶ On the social and economic fronts, too, the Gaullists proved successful. The standard of living in France soared by 25 percent since Pompidou’s election, and the country’s growth rate overtook all other European nations.⁷⁷ Herman Kahn’s Hudson Institute even suggested that the French economy would overtake West Germany’s by 1990.⁷⁸ Indeed, historian Frank Wilson seems right to claim that with Pompidou’s succession, there was every appearance of an “easy and trouble-free” transition in to *l’après de Gaulle* (the years immediately after de Gaulle’s resignation).⁷⁹

Despite the apparent success of Pompidou and the UDR, what scholars like Wilson have been unable to ignore is the fact that neither the man nor the party would hold power by 1974. In the case of the president, a rare form of leukemia called Waldenström’s disease rendered him almost useless for the final months of his life. He died on April 2, 1974. Diagnosing the ills of the Gaullist party, however, has not been as simple. Many historians point to what Andrew Knapp terms the “external environment” to explain the sharp decline of the UDR in the early 1970s.⁸⁰ The events of 1968, they insist, inspired certain groups to make additional demands on

⁷⁵ Quoted in David Goldey, “The French Presidential Elections of 1 and 15 June 1969,” *Parliamentary Affairs* 22 (Autumn 1969), 348.

⁷⁶ Wilson, “Gaullism without de Gaulle,” 488.

⁷⁷ See Goldey, “The French Presidential Elections of 1 and 15 June 1969,” 346.

⁷⁸ See Goldey, “The French Presidential Elections of 1 and 15 June 1969,” 346.

⁷⁹ Wilson, “Gaullism without de Gaulle,” 488.

⁸⁰ Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 14. Although Knapp is the primary historian to put forth the “external environment” argument, he rests much of it on the work of two earlier authors: Christian Stoffaës, *La Grande*

the government. Workers sought to build upon the quantitative gains they achieved in '68 by striking for improved working conditions and across-the-board wage increases. French laborers downed their tools so frequently, in fact, that well over 6 million working days were lost between 1969 and 1973.⁸¹ Students, whose calls for reduced class sizes and an expanded curriculum went largely unnoticed in '68, became more vocal during Pompidou's presidency as well. Their demonstrations also had a crippling affect on the country. The student sit-ins and street protests that occurred during the winter of 1971, for instance, nearly forced Pompidou to postpone the municipal elections scheduled for March of that year.⁸²

Economic growth was also fading by the early 1970s. High unemployment, rising inflation, and the monetary confusion following the suspension of dollar convertibility in August 1971, all foreshadowed the end of the *trente glorieuses* (thirty years of post-war economic expansion). The energy crisis of 1973 only exacerbated this economic slowdown. The decision made by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to place an oil embargo on certain Western European countries, including France, caused prices to increase by more than 50 percent from October 1973 to June 1974.⁸³ Reduced supplies and higher prices continued to hurt France even after OPEC stabilized the cost per barrel of oil in the summer of 1974. Historians and political scientists frequently point to what is now simply referred to as "the crisis" when explaining the UDR's loss of power. They argue that the economic recession that occurred prior

menace industrielle (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1978) and Alain Cotta, *La France et l'impératif mondial* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1978).

⁸¹ For a thorough discussion of the labor strikes that occurred during the early 1970s, see Jeff Bridgford, "The Events of May – Consequences for Industrial Relations in France," in *May 1968: Coming of Age*, eds. David Hanley and Anne Kerr (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989): 100-116.

⁸² To date, nothing has been published regarding the street demonstrations that accompanied the 1971 municipal elections. See *Le Monde*, March, April, and May of that year for more details.

⁸³ See Robert J. Lieber, "Energy Policies of the Fifth Republic: Autonomy Versus Constraint," in *The Impact of the Fifth Republic on France*, eds. William G. Andrews and Stanley Hoffman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981): 179-96.

to October 1973 combined with oil embargo forced the Gaullists into a fate not unlike the Conservatives of Great Britain.⁸⁴ By 1974, neither party could rally the support needed to maintain its control of the government.

Without question, the “external environment” did contribute to the ultimate weakening of the Gaullist party during Pompidou’s five years in office. But these social and economic factors only tell half of the story. As Bella Balassa’s study has suggested, the economic troubles that shook nearly every Western government during the 1970s did not fully affect France until the first months of 1974. The rapid expansion of manufacturing production, along with increased exports, meant that while governments like that of Great Britain were freezing wages and prices, France’s was overseeing slow but steady economic expansion. Upon Pompidou’s death, Balassa concludes, “France enjoyed the highest rate of economic growth among the EEC countries.”⁸⁵ Furthermore, the social unrest of the early 1970s functioned to help, not hurt, the Gaullist party. Just as the conservative backlash to 1968 seemed to have buoyed the UDR during the June legislative elections, a similar phenomenon occurred during the spring of 1971 when the party managed to recruit an additional 200,000 members.⁸⁶ If the “external environment,” therefore, does not adequately explain the decline of the UDR, then perhaps a closer inspection of the “internal environment” of the Gaullist party will more accurately explain how *Le Monde* could announce “The End of Gaullism” in 1975.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ For instance, see Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 22-39.

⁸⁵ Bela Balassa, “The French Economy under the Fifth Republic, 1958-1978,” in *The Impact of the Fifth Republic on France*, eds. William G. Andrews and Stanley Hoffman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 132.

⁸⁶ See *Le Monde*, September 24, 1971.

⁸⁷ *Le Monde*, January 1, 1975.

The Problems of Succession: Legitimacy and the *Gaullistes historiques*

“No European state,” Robert Johnson pointed out in 1980, “can exhibit such a personalist movement and maintain itself long after its author’s demise.”⁸⁸ Indeed, no Gaullist would occupy the Elysée for more than two decades after Pompidou’s death, and no Gaullist presidential candidate in 1974, 1981, or 1988 managed to earn more than 20 percent of the vote on the first ballot. Even on the local level, the strength of the UDR quickly ebbed following its success in the municipal elections of 1971. The Gaullist victory in the legislative elections just two years later was so slim, in fact, that the party’s secretary-general could only liken it to near disaster. “We won,” said Alain Peyrefitte, “but with the amazement of a motorist who realizes he has just escaped from an accident unscathed.”⁸⁹ Although the UDR may have physically escaped the accident – the party lost 113 seats in the Assembly – it was clearly shaken. The Gaullists enjoyed a parliamentary majority for the last time in 1973.⁹⁰

While Johnson’s suggestion that the UDR’s decline was inevitable is difficult to defend, his reference to the “personalist movement” seems especially appropriate in the case of de Gaulle. Few people in French history, after all, could unabashedly claim to be the very personification of the country as he did in 1944. But Johnson’s allusion also has larger implications when considering France as a whole. As Rodney Barker has recently shown, necessarily linked to any “personalist movement” is the notion of political legitimacy. Barker defines legitimacy strictly in terms of what he calls the “political relationships” or the “observed relations between government and subordination.” “Legitimacy exists,” he claims, “where there

⁸⁸ Robert Johnson, *The Long March of the French Left* (London: Macmillan, 1981), 98.

⁸⁹ Alain Peyrefitte, *Quand la rose se fanera* (Paris: Plon, 1983), 7.

⁹⁰ For more on the 1973 legislative elections, see Hayward and Wright, “Presidential Supremacy,” 294-306.

is a belief in a government's right to govern.”⁹¹ Correct though it may be, such a conception describes legitimacy only in its most modern context. To be understood fully, political legitimacy must also be viewed from an historical viewpoint.

De Gaulle largely derived his legitimacy from the historic events that occurred between 1940 and 1958. Whereas much of France had either conceded to or collaborated with the *de facto* Vichy government after the fall of the country in May 1940, he escaped to Great Britain in an effort to assemble fellow countrymen who would continue to fight the occupying Nazi forces. True, the resulting Free French movement failed to rally many notable names, and it shared a tense relationship with the Ally powers, but de Gaulle and his comrades were the ones who assumed leadership in France following its liberation in August 1944. As president of the provisional government, he oversaw the transition from war to peace and within a few months, says Williams, “was universally recognized as the liberator of France.”⁹² Similarly, French men and women could not help but hold de Gaulle in high esteem after diffusing the crisis relating to Algeria fourteen years later. Although he had spent much of the 1950s refusing to participate in the increasingly unstable governments of the Fourth Republic, President René Coty and other prominent officials insisted that only he could prevent the outbreak of civil war in May 1958. Again, de Gaulle played the role of savior, overseeing the establishment of the Fifth Republic, a new constitution, and, ultimately, a peaceful end to the troubles in Algeria.

If Jean Charlot's assertion that “the leader finds . . . in his action his legitimacy” is accepted, then the events of 1944 and 1958 clearly established de Gaulle as the legitimate ruler

⁹¹ Rodney Barker, *Political Legitimacy and the State* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 20.

⁹² Williams, *The Last Great Frenchman*, 305.

of France.⁹³ In both years, peace and political stability coincided with his rise to power. What has troubled historians, and even the man himself, however, are the less tangible elements of de Gaulle's personal legitimacy. As Charlot has also noted in reference to de Gaulle, "it is neither the function nor the stripes that make leaders, but their character translated into action."⁹⁴ Perhaps sociologist Raymond Aron put these words even more precisely. "The Fifth Republic was," he claimed, "the fruit of charismatic leadership."⁹⁵ Indeed, few men of de Gaulle's generation, or any generation for that matter, could instruct a man to find an armchair and smoke a cigar without uttering a single word.

For the German sociologist Max Weber, the charismatic leader opposes the patriarch, the landed lord of former times, and the servant of the modern state, because he is obeyed not only by virtue of a custom or a law, but by virtue of the faith he inspires. One "gives way" to the charisma of this prophet, this warrior, this demagogue, on account of his exceptional merits.⁹⁶ But the "charismatic leader," like the "traditional leader" and the "legal leader," Weber warns, are only "ideal types" that rarely exist in reality. In the exceptional occurrence that such a figure does exist, as did de Gaulle, their legitimacy is founded on the "routinization of charismatic legitimacy."⁹⁷ He associates with this term a "community" of disciples, followers, and party organizations. The "routinization of charismatic legitimacy" remains, however, an unstable form of legitimacy, for it is dependent on the leader's capabilities. "It cannot remain stable," he

⁹³ Charlot, *The Gaullist Phenomenon*, 44.

⁹⁴ Charlot, *The Gaullist Phenomenon*, 44.

⁹⁵ Raymond Aron, "Démission de Français ou renovation de la France?," *Preuves* 96 (February 1959), 184.

⁹⁶ Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Los Angeles: UCLA Press, 1978), 1: 240.

⁹⁷ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1: 242.

contends, “but becomes either traditionalized or rationalized.”⁹⁸ Jean Jacques Servan-Schreiber cleverly articulated Weber’s theory in 1969 declaring, “There [de Gaulle] is, a legendary figure, truly fabulous, holding this country under the spell of his presence – but he no longer has anything to offer.”⁹⁹

Pompidou could offer even less. Unlike his predecessor, he was far from possessing the same sort of charismatic power and even farther from amassing a “community” of faithful disciples. Pompidou did, however, have a certain personal charm. True, he exuded a noticeable shyness and excitedly wrung his hands while addressing the nation on television, but his expression always remained calm, and he left his colleagues with an impression of strength and steadfastness. His war comrades appeared struck by his “remarkable physical control when faced with danger [and] his capacity to face up to things, once the forces were against him.”¹⁰⁰ Pompidou’s participation in the provisional government of 1944 and years of dedicated service as prime minister, however, never made him a “charismatic leader.” His presidency was based instead on what Weber terms a “rational-legal” form of legitimacy, which is achieved only through electoral success.¹⁰¹ “De Gaulle knew that people would follow him,” Pompidou acknowledged. “I will have to be able to convince them.”¹⁰²

Indeed, Pompidou recognized that without charismatic leadership he would have to assume broader powers to reinforce his “rational-legal” legitimacy. All of de Gaulle’s successors, he argued, would have to compensate for their inevitable lack of charisma – or

⁹⁸ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1: 249.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Charlot, *The Gaullist Phenomenon*, 43.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Pierre Rouanet, *Pompidou* (Paris: Grasset, 1969), 43.

¹⁰¹ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1: 215.

¹⁰² Quoted in Charlot, *The Gaullist Phenomenon*, 136.

“personal coefficient” as he termed it – by “intervening in the direction of the state constantly” and “maintaining their supremacy through their daily activity.”¹⁰³ Indeed, Pompidou’s “daily activities” brought him and his staff to the brink of near exhaustion. He expected his prime minister to visit the Elysée three times a week, where de Gaulle required only a weekly appointment. De Gaulle’s advisors would be in monthly contact with the various government ministries whose activities they “followed.” Pompidou insisted that they exchange daily telephone calls.¹⁰⁴ According to Edouard Ballardur, a member of Pompidou’s staff for over a decade, Pompidou managed economic and social policy as closely when president as he had when premier. His interventions ranged over questions as specific as pensions, modifications in the calculation of minimum wage, and measures for the disabled.¹⁰⁵

To “convince” his countrymen further, Pompidou also surrounded himself with the generation of Gaullists who had been de Gaulle’s companions since the Resistance. Frequently referred to as the *Gaullistes historiques* (historic Gaullists), these men shared in common the shame of May 1940, the pride of August 1944, and the apprehension of June 1958. According to Charlot, the *Gaullistes historiques* “were the people who made history, and their hearts thumped when they heard their companion André Malraux say . . . ‘While all the others have behind them the histories of their parties, we have behind us the history of our country.’”¹⁰⁶ Pompidou’s appointment of these men, including Michel Debré as defense minister, Olivier Guichard as minister of education, and Jacques Chaban-Delmas as prime minister, thus accomplished two

¹⁰³ Pompidou, *Le Noeud gordien*, 65.

¹⁰⁴ For details regarding Pompidou’s work habits, see Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 336-37.

¹⁰⁵ See Roussel, *Georges Pompidou*, 424.

¹⁰⁶ Charlot, *The Gaullist Phenomenon*, 92.

goals.¹⁰⁷ They brought with them a trove of political experience to assist in the transition process and the subsequent administration of the government. They also held the key to Pompidou's problem of legitimacy. By naming Debré, Guichard, and Chaban to his cabinet, Pompidou not only evoked the country's history but also de Gaulle, "the symbol," himself.

Although many historians of the Fifth Republic have rightly interpreted the appointment of the *Gaullistes historiques* as Pompidou's attempt to capture some of the charismatic leadership possessed by de Gaulle, they have failed to explain its larger implications. As Pompidou made obvious in the 1969 election, the preservation of the Republic was to be his primary concern as president of France. The relief he expressed upon his election that voters chose not to return to the chaos of the past clearly indicated to him that the country took its first steps in achieving this goal. Stability also had to extend beyond his election to the presidency. He pledged, after all, that "continuity" would characterize his government and that in no event would the transition lead to a "crisis within the regime." The appointment of the *Gaullistes historiques* was, thus, a logical decision, as they embodied both the stability of de Gaulle's early years and the "continuity" that Pompidou so desired.¹⁰⁸

In fact, Debré, Guichard, and Chaban played such a critical role during the initial stages of *l'après de Gaulle* that Pompidou felt compelled to retain their services even if they strayed from the party line. Of course, their old age meant that most *Gaullistes historiques* probably had only a few years left to engage actively in politics. Their early dismissal, however, would rob

¹⁰⁷ Chaban was the *nom de guerre*, or literally war name, that Jacques Chaban assumed during the Resistance and then kept it. It is often used instead of his original surname rather than as an addition to it. Pompidou was considered by many to be a "modern" Gaullist, not a *Gaulliste historique*.

¹⁰⁸ See Jean Charlot, *L'UNR: étude du pouvoir au sein d'un parti politique* (Paris: Armand Collin, 1967), 302-05, for more on the role of the *Gaulliste historiques* before Pompidou's presidency. Knapp discusses them within the context of the legitimacy they brought to the Pompidou government in *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 25-28, as does Thody, *The Fifth French Republic*, 61-62.

Pompidou of the political legitimacy they provided and would also be suggestive of instability within the new government. Pompidou knew from first hand experience that the Gaullist constituency would not tolerate political turmoil. They were the ones who marched for the Republic in May 1968, gave the UDR 296 of the 495 seats in the Assembly during the legislative elections two weeks later, and voted for Pompidou's platform of "continuity" and "openness" the following year. The appointment of the *Gaullistes historiques*, therefore, actually handcuffed Pompidou. Their termination could very well indicate to voters that the chaos of '68 had returned, undermining him, his party, and perhaps even the wobbling Republic itself.

By 1969, the political views of the *Gaullistes historiques* spanned the Gaullist political spectrum, ranging from the near reaction of Debré to the more moderate posturing of Chaban. That their political ideology lacked uniformity, however, is not remarkable. Of the five appearances of the word "Gaullism" in de Gaulle's writings, notes Charlot, its most specific usage identifies it simply as "the contemporary form of *élan* of our country."¹⁰⁹ This *élan*, this nationalistic verve, acted as the foundation of Gaullism. In itself, the assertion that "France cannot be France without greatness" exemplified Gaullism's nationalistic outlook.¹¹⁰ "When France stands at the front rank of the world's great nations," insisted de Gaulle, "she will truly be 'herself.'"¹¹¹ De Gaulle's France included Madonnas in medieval frescoes, the Arc de Triomphe in the sunshine, Notre Dame at dusk, and his mother weeping after hearing news of the French defeat in 1870. The use of such imagery, rather than any argument, made Gaullism much more

¹⁰⁹ Jean Charlot, "Le Gaullisme," in *Histoire des droites en France, Politique*, ed. Jean-François Sirinelli (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 86.

¹¹⁰ De Gaulle, *Mémoires de guerre*, 2: 364.

¹¹¹ De Gaulle, *Mémoires de guerre*, 1: 7.

than an ideology. Gaullism was, as de Gaulle put it, also “a certain idea of France.”¹¹² He expressed such a notion in an interview eleven months before his death. “For the majority of those who followed me, it does not seem that ideology was the major element,” he remarked. “The important thing was something else: during the war, obviously, it was the national will; afterward, and especially since 1958, it was the feeling that your motives, good or bad, were not the motives of all the politicians.”¹¹³

Gaullism was not merely political indifference papered over by nationalism. Certainly, national interests preceded personal or partisan ones, but the Gaullists’ emphasis on national sovereignty also gave their principles and programs a measure of coherence. Stemming from de Gaulle’s belief in France’s “exemplary destiny,” Gaullism meant a refusal to submit France and French policy to the authority of supra-national organizations or to the constraints of power blocs: hence France’s withdrawal from the NATO integrated command, the dismissal of the UN as a “thingummy,” and the concern to preserve Europe’s independence from the US. From these policies emerged France’s massive commitment of money to a small but “independent” nuclear deterrent and de Gaulle’s encouragement of underdeveloped countries to assert their autonomy from the superpowers. Gaullists’ desire for French independence also helps to explain de Gaulle’s vilification of the Communists, whom he frequently likened to international agents, as he did in June 1968.

In order to promote French sovereignty, Gaullists advocated the authority of the state. According to de Gaulle’s *La Discorde chez l’ennemi*, political weakness, as in the case of

¹¹² Quoted in Charlot, *The Gaullist Phenomenon*, 9.

¹¹³ Quoted in André Malraux, *Felled Oaks: Conversations with de Gaulle* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 82.

Wilhelmine Germany, often times leads to military defeat and chaos.¹¹⁴ After all, the founding act of Gaullism resulted from the collapse of the Third Republic in June 1940, and de Gaulle's return to power in 1958 followed from the structural failings of the Fourth. Such events caused de Gaulle to believe that a state with authority was both a condition of national independence and a natural reflex. In his own words, the French state "bestowed" a greater amount of autonomy on Algeria, and when faced with crisis of 1968 he first insisted, "The state does not retreat," if necessary from shooting demonstrators.¹¹⁵ Only Pompidou dissuaded him from doing so. But the state's authority extended well beyond social issues. Like de Gaulle himself, the bulk of Gaullists officials believed it the prerogative of the French state to intervene regularly in the economy. Political parties, too, had to be directed by the state. As Charlot has revealed, Gaullist organizations played a large part in the success of the movement.¹¹⁶

However important, the president, not the party, stood as the centerpiece of the Gaullist design. De Gaulle's 1958 constitution perhaps best exemplifies this notion, as it created a system whereby an electoral college of 80,000 notables selected the president of the Republic. Moreover, following his election, the head of state was no longer politically responsible to the legislative body, and he served a seven-year term with the possibility of reelection. The constitution also reaffirmed several rights accorded to executives in the past. The president retained the right to dissolve the National Assembly, for instance, and to appoint the prime minister. As authoritarian as the 1958 constitution appeared, de Gaulle insisted that it ruled simply as "a spirit" and that real political leadership could come only from the individual, not an

¹¹⁴ Charles de Gaulle, *La Discorde chez l'ennemi* (Paris: Plon, 1972), 34-56.

¹¹⁵ Quoted in Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 32.

¹¹⁶ Charlot offers a thorough discussion of the importance of the Gaullist party apparatus in *The Gaullist Phenomenon*, 101-41.

“institution.”¹¹⁷ Only the president could rise above the self-serving interests of political factions and appeal directly to the people. In this way, Gaullism promoted unity between the leader and the citizens, and between the citizens themselves. The leader’s duty remains to mediate public interests and encourage social reconciliation rather than class conflict.

Gaullism stood as a broad political tent under which the authoritarianism of Debré and the progressivism of Chaban could both find room. This diversity, Pompidou hoped, would bring to his new government a clear sense of balance and help him fulfill his campaign promises of “continuity” and “openness.” But Chaban, more than Debré, seemed to embody both ideas. Along with his experience as a Resistance leader, Gaullist deputy, and minister on de Gaulle’s staff, Chaban maintained close ties with the political left throughout his life. His joining of the Radical party in 1946 and later his participation in the left-leaning Pierre Mendès-France government, elicited the ire of the more orthodox members of the Gaullist party. That Pompidou appointed Chaban to the premiership in 1969 is, however, not astonishing. Always the shrewd tactician, Pompidou understood that in order to pass the key pieces of his economic agenda – British entrance into the EEC being the linchpin – he needed to reach out to the moderate elements of the party. The moderate viewpoints of Chaban were to be the conduit through which Pompidou would discover the support necessary to enact such policies.

If Chaban’s appeal could supply the president with added political latitude, it could also hold Pompidou prisoner. Being a *Gaulliste historique*, Chaban played a crucial role in legitimating and stabilizing the Pompidou’s presidency during the initial and uncertain months of *l’après de Gaulle*. His participation in the government was essential to ensuring the political survival of Pompidou, even as he announced his progressive social and economic program to the

¹¹⁷ De Gaulle, *Discours et messages*, 4: 163.

Assembly in September 1969. This *Société Nouvelle* (New Society) agenda, as he termed it, included everything from sweeping education reform to the privatization of French industry. Although Chaban also called for the build up of “world-class” industrial groups, much to the president’s delight, Pompidou had major philosophical objections to the New Society. “There is no such thing as a society,” he told his education minister, Peyrefitte. “There are only individuals and France.”¹¹⁸ But because Chaban himself could not readily be dismissed, neither could his policies. Accordingly, the president had to retain his prime minister until firmly establishing “continuity.” Perhaps the termination of Chaban in July 1972 was the point at which “continuity” was reached. But this point, says historian Philip Thody, it was too late, as Gaullism soon lost out to a more “relaxed form of conservatism.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Peyrefitte, *Le Mal français*, 94.

¹¹⁹ Thody, *The Fifth French Republic*, 73.

Chapter 2: The Mad Years

The Future of France: The Nora Report

Writing just prior to the 1969 presidential election, Georges Pompidou asked the question that most French men and women were surely thinking, “What will France be in the future?”¹ Few people dared to answer. After all, the fate of the world – much less that of France – seemed far less certain after the events that had occurred in the previous twelve months. Assassins’ bullets had taken the lives of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King. Soviet tanks rolled over the Prague Summer in an attempt to “normalize” Czechoslovakian liberalism. And a new offensive launched by northern Communists promised to prolong fighting in Viet Nam. France may not have been mired in war, occupied by a foreign power, or mourning the deaths of its most popular leaders, but the country was not without its problems. In April 1969, the Fifth Republic’s chief architect and only president, Charles de Gaulle, abruptly resigned after his referendum on “participation” failed by 6 percentage points. Furthermore, the seizure of schools, worker sit-ins, and street demonstrations of the year before continued to cast a long shadow over French society. The events of May 1968 had given rise to a psychology of fear and mistrust during what sociologist Michel Crozier has labeled the five “mad years” that followed.²

Pompidou emerged as the first figure who tried to make sense of the madness. For him, uncertain times required that steady hands operate the controls of government, and in 1968, his were the steadiest. He had convinced a raucous National Assembly that order would triumph

¹ Pompidou, *Le Noeud gordien*, 171.

² Michel Crozier, “France’s Cultural Anxieties Under Gaullism: The Revolution Revisited,” in *The Impact of the Fifth Republic on France*, eds. William G. Andrews and Stanley Hoffman, 237-38. Crozier describes 1968-1972 as a period when “The basic pattern of social control had been shaken deeply and the traditional social [norms] could no longer be trusted as they had been.” “The mad years,” he claims, “were dominated by an unusually high mixture of institutional fights and fashions . . . whose contents . . . showed no discernible coherence.”

over chaos. He had satisfied labor leaders by agreeing to better pay and benefits. He had even attempted to pacify students by refusing to implicate them in the turmoil that brought the country to the brink of collapse. But Pompidou never sought to rebuild France using full-scale reform; it was simply not his nature. “You need to be extremely pretentious to pose as a reformer,” he once told an aide.³ That skepticism arose from a heightened awareness of the risks involved. “If you rush things too much,” he said during a July 1968 press conference, “you end up producing human suffering.”⁴ Besides, those “Left bank intellectuals” whom Pompidou did hold responsible for ’68 constituted a small minority of the electorate. To indulge in social tinkering simply to please them would alienate the majority of voters who gave the Gaullists an additional 119 Assembly seats in June 1968. To ignore the concerns of workers, who, unlike students, could bring vital sectors of the economy to a standstill with a general strike, would be to induce paralysis. Pompidou thus entered the Elysée Palace in June 1969 carrying the burdens of both his party and his country in one hand, and a prudent economic plan designed to appease even the most restless members of French society in the other.

Pompidou, the self-styled “economist,” firmly believed that social peace was a function of economic prosperity. Low wages and high unemployment, he assumed, had provoked a “reaction” from laborers during May 1968. He concluded, therefore, that, “the state [should] transform the working-class” in order to avoid a similar “reaction” of strikes and mass protest.⁵ Pompidou outlined what he would later term the “Sixth Plan” in his political treatise *Le Noeud gordien*. “A healthy economic strategy should encourage the productivity of industry. The gains

³ Quoted in Sean Rials, *Les Idées politiques du Président Georges Pompidou* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1977), 88.

⁴ Quoted in Rials, *Les Idées politiques*, 87.

⁵ Pompidou, *Le Noeud gordien*, 167.

of industry . . . will nourish social progress.” As the “country’s biggest industrialist” and “master of credit,” the French government would do its part by subsidizing the construction of steel mills, nuclear plants, and roadways.⁶ These state-backed industries would give workers steady employment, competitive wages, and thus little reason to act in a way that many did in ’68. Pompidou made his intentions clear during his first cabinet meeting in June 1969. “We have one objective that should dominate all others: to make France a great industrial power. It is within our grasp. Let us reach it without getting sidetracked!”⁷

But Pompidou’s failing health slowed the Sixth Plan. His body, already ravaged by leukemia, rapidly deteriorated after taking office. He grew so weak, in fact, that by the fall of 1972 he remained seated when addressing the Elysée press corps. The following year, he even cancelled a number of engagements with foreign dignitaries on the pretext of influenza. The cortisone treatments Pompidou took to boost his exhausted immune system had little effect beyond visibly bloating his face. Yet he insisted that no one outside of his family be told of his illness, which kept him in constant discomfort and great pain. Staffers could not help but notice that the president’s disposition became more unpleasant with every passing year. The minister of agriculture, Jacques Chirac, claimed that while Pompidou’s mind remained lucid until his death in April 1974, he was often despondent and easily irritated. Another cabinet member suggested that as early as the spring of 1972, Pompidou began delegating responsibilities that he normally reserved for himself.⁸ He simply lacked the physical strength needed to administer a coherent economic policy.

⁶ Pompidou, *Le Noeud gordien*, 124-125, 153.

⁷ Quoted in Peyrefitte, *Le Mal français*, 95.

⁸ The opinions of Chirac and the unnamed cabinet member are discussed in Pierre Messmer, *Après tant de batailles* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1992), 412, 414; For details on Pompidou’s illness, see Roussel, *Georges Pompidou*, 473.

Resistance to the Sixth Plan also came from Pompidou's minister of finance, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. A man of remarkable ability and great ambition, Giscard approached the politics of the late 1960s with a "half-liberal, half-conservative" philosophy that rejected the extremes of both the right and left.⁹ Yet Giscard never considered himself a "profound" Gaullist, as did Pompidou. In fact, he shunned the label all together. Giscard belonged instead to a parliamentary group of his own creation called the *Républicains Indépendants* (Independent Republicans, RI). Party affiliations aside, Giscard's RI was an unwavering supporter of the Fifth Republic and of the Gaullist regime. So often did the aims of the two parties overlap that they formed an electoral coalition known as the *Majorité* (Majority) in 1962. By the time Giscard assumed control of the finance ministry seven years later, however, both he and his party had become increasingly critical of their Gaullist partners. Publicly, he said little about the Sixth Plan. But behind closed doors at RI party headquarters, Giscard and his cohorts began devising their own reform package that went far beyond that of the president. Moreover, Giscard let it be known that he, a wealthy technocrat with ties to the French aristocracy, intended to unseat Pompidou in the next presidential election.

If the president's ill health and Giscard's personal ambitions slowed the Sixth Plan, the social and economic initiatives proposed by Prime Minister Jacques Chaban-Delmas brought it to a halt. Unparalleled in scope and unrivaled in degree, Chaban's New Society program promised nothing short of a remade France. As with Pompidou's reforms, those of Chaban would use the power of the state to jump-start the economy, create additional jobs, and raise workers' wages. But Chaban's France was not one that could be steadied by economic

⁹ Quoted in J.R. Frears, *Political Parties and Elections in the French Fifth Republic* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1977), 59.

prosperity alone. Universities would have greater latitude in determining course material. State-run media outlets would be given over to private firms. And labor unions would have exclusive access to lucrative state contracts. In short, Chaban's New Society was Pompidou's Sixth Plan more drastic. Perhaps the president should have expected little else when he requested that Chaban, a celebrated fighter for the Resistance and long-time president of the National Assembly, fill the position of prime minister in June 1969. Despite the valuable baggage Chaban carried with him into the Matignon Palace (the prime minister's residence), he never looked the part of a Gaullist premier. His athletic build, pomaded hair, and suntanned complexion made it seem as though he should be attending a Jay Gatsby party, not cabinet meetings at the Elysée. Yet for all his flash, Chaban was as dedicated to averting another May 1968 as was Pompidou, and as determined to capture the presidency as was Giscard.

France's future, or at least the ten years after 1968, was determined most by these three men: Pompidou, the aging heir to the Gaullist legacy; Giscard, the new darling of the French center; and Chaban, the *Gaulliste historique* turned aggressive reformer. If, as Michel Crozier has suggested, the early 1970s were characterized by paranoia that bordered on madness, none were as mad as these three. Pompidou, fearing that public knowledge of his failing health would elicit calls for his resignation and thus jeopardize the political stability he hoped to establish, had to keep his illness from even his closest advisors. Less grave, but conceivably just as damaging, was the secret held by Giscard. In a country wary of privilege and pretense, the Association of French Nobility had never recognized his family's claim to the aristocratic d'Estaing title. As a result, Giscard had to focus public attention away from his personal wealth, fine schooling, and dubious aristocratic ties, lest he be seen as an out-of-touch upstart unable to meet the challenges

of post-1968 France.¹⁰ Even Chaban, the assertive new prime minister, had his own skeletons to keep hidden, as he had failed to make income tax payments during the previous three years. But as ominous as scandal must have seemed for Chaban, Giscard, and Pompidou in the summer of 1969, nothing frightened them more than the specter of '68. Chaban spoke for everyone in Pompidou's cabinet during a July 20 press conference when he admitted, "May 1968 could revisit France with less spontaneity and more organization. The government must anticipate events constantly."¹¹

Unbeknownst to Chaban, Pompidou had begun "anticipating" as early as June 1968. That month, he commissioned a team of seven public servants to report on France's economy following the dramatic events of May. When Pompidou's friend and principal author of the report, Simon Nora, published the group's findings thirteen months later, the entire presidential staff took notice. Above all, the Nora Report denounced de Gaulle's use of state authority and recommended that the French government adapt to the "competitive climate" of post-war Europe. Known in France as the *trente glorieuses*, the decades after the Second World War had witnessed substantial economic growth for Western nations. In countries like West Germany, attempts to diminish the role of the state and to rely more on the free market coincided with this post-war boom. Yet for France, the *trente glorieuses* were ones where the state continued its intervention in nearly all economic matters. De Gaulle expected little to change when he assumed the presidency in 1958. According to Nora, de Gaulle and his party had a conception of the state that differed dramatically from other right-wing groups like the German Christian Democrats or the British Conservatives. The Gaullists "had the state in their blood," he said,

¹⁰ For details on the Giscard family's ties to the French aristocracy, see Frédéric Abadie and Jean-Pierre Corcelette, *Valéry Giscard d'Estaing* (Paris: Balland, 1997), 16.

¹¹ Quoted in *Le Monde*, July 21, 1969.

referring to the seventeenth-century mercantilist policies of Jean-Baptiste Colbert, minister of finance under Louis XIV. “But it is clear that the authorities cannot do everything.”¹²

Yet in de Gaulle’s France, authorities were doing everything and doing it well. State regulation of credit, prices, and interest rates encouraged consumer spending. A high protective tariff set at nearly 30 percent shielded companies from foreign competitors. And the nationalization of large-scale industry – electricity, steel, and coal were the largest – helped to rebuild infrastructure decimated by war. De Gaulle’s model of state control worked so well, in fact, that during his first decade as president the annual average rate of growth for France was higher than that of all other countries excluding Japan. As the Nora Report pointed out, however, France was now rapidly losing ground to its European neighbors. The growth rate of Germany’s Gross National Product (GNP), which hit a post-war low of 4.2 percent in 1963, equaled that of France just four years later. Italy’s GNP also rebounded and increased at an annual rate of 2 percentage points during the first half of the 1960s. Similar upward trends were occurring in the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, Sweden, and Great Britain. France’s GNP continued to grow at an annual rate of 5.2 percent, but it was not nearly enough to keep pace with the rest of Europe.¹³

Once the solution to France’s economic woes, the state had become the problem by 1968. “Reconstruction is now over,” Nora reminded his readers, “our frontiers are open, and a competitive climate now prevails.”¹⁴ Acclimating to this new climate meant that France had first to rollback the state policies that caused its economy to stagnate. Nora’s group agreed that

¹² Quoted in Hayward, “State Intervention in France,” 294.

¹³ For a discussion of the growth rate of the French economy, see Balassa, “The French Economy Under the Fifth Republic,” 121-138.

¹⁴ Quoted in Hayward, “State Intervention in France,” 294.

artificially low prices and interest rates promoted spending. But they also found that the same practices limited the profit earnings of small, privately owned firms, which by law were considered for subsidized loans only after public enterprise. For those companies capable of surviving such restrictions, few could remain competitive with large-scale industries that also benefited from depressed interest rates and periodic devaluations (intended to combat inflation), as well as high tariffs. Yet the panel discovered that many of these state-backed industries, or “national champions” as de Gaulle liked to call them, were not as robust as once thought. The Professional Plan of 1966, which compelled France’s major firms to modernize their capital through government investment, also limited the growth of heavy industry because it simultaneously depressed prices.¹⁵

If these were, as one *Le Monde* correspondent claimed, “programs that sought to preserve capitalism while tying its hands,” Nora and company had exposed the ropes.¹⁶ But how was France to slip out? According to the report, the answer involved “a more subtle set of priorities in state intervention.” In reality, though, there existed nothing subtle about Nora’s proposals. “Everyone will agree,” he declared, “that the state’s role can no longer be exactly what it has been.”¹⁷ With post-war reconstruction at an end, France’s economy required a new impetus that only economic competition could provide. Nora’s promotion of the capitalist economy was, however, not without its qualifications. He conceded that the “state’s main function is to *preserve* the quality of the economic environment.”¹⁸ The Elysée should remain in charge of the monetary system, including currency rates, and should continue to finance industrial

¹⁵ Hayward, “State Intervention in France,” 296.

¹⁶ *Le Monde*, September 19, 1978.

¹⁷ Quoted in Hayward, “State Intervention in France,” 294.

¹⁸ Quoted in Hayward, “State Intervention in France,” 294. Emphasis added.

development. But *control* over prices, profits, and wages should now belong to the forces of the free market. The commission also suggested that the market establish prices for both foreign and domestic goods, and that France assume a more prominent role in the increasingly competitive EEC. Even publicly owned corporations and their workers would have greater autonomy through what Nora termed “program contracts.” These agreements would allow companies under state supervision to set profit and production quotas as long as the figures corresponded roughly to those desired by the government.¹⁹

Freeing capitalism from the binds of the French state clearly served as the Nora Report’s *raison d’être* – and with convincing results. As historian John Hayward put it, immediately following the publication of the study in July 1969, “government circles began to shift decisively in favor of the free market . . . as the focus of the national economic policy.”²⁰ This sea-change in opinion was not entirely Nora’s doing. The tides began to shift as early as 1958 after the Armand-Rueff commission recommended that the Elysée loosen its hold over nationalized industry and prices.²¹ The French employers’ federation issued a more direct attack on state intervention in the economy seven years later with its “free enterprise” manifesto. “We are caught in a system of terrible rigidity,” the study claimed in its opening lines, “and free enterprise is our only way out.”²² The loudest voice calling for adopting the free market came from within the government itself. In an April 1968 study, the minister of industrial development asserted, “Industrial policy above all implies the acceptance of an economic

¹⁹ Hayward, “State Intervention in France,” 296.

²⁰ Hayward, “State Intervention in France,” 294.

²¹ For details, see Alain Prate, *Les Batailles économique du Général de Gaulle* (Paris: Plon, 1978), 83.

²² Quoted in Cotta, *La France et l’impératif mondial*, 145.

doctrine . . . reference to the laws of a competitive market should be the basis of French industrial policy, whose mission will be to exploit its strengths and compensate its weaknesses.”²³ Clearly, by July 1969 “government circles” needed little convincing to “shift” in favor of the free market. But had the Nora Report convinced the right circles?

Prime Minister Chaban provided the answer during a press conference in late July. Praising Nora for “articulating so well what others have attempted to say,” he made clear that the report had indeed persuaded one of the most powerful men in French politics. “The free market is France’s future . . . and this report will lead us there.”²⁴ But Chaban did have reservations about what Nora and his colleagues neglected to mention in their study. After all, the state’s reach was not limited simply to France’s economic sector. As it had since de Gaulle’s return to power in 1958, the *Office de Radiodiffusion et Télévision Française* (Office of French Radio and Television, ORTF) remained under state supervision. The minister of information continued to supply content to ORTF newscasters, and criticism of the Gaullist party or its policies was still prohibited. The government also retained control of the rapidly expanding education system, determining everything from enrollment quotas to curriculum requirements for France’s schools and universities. Officials within the Elysée even continued to take interest in tasks such as the construction of low-rent housing developments to “balance” the excessive growth of the Paris region.²⁵ Although Chaban never once hinted at such during the July 28 press conference, the state’s involvement in social matters clearly irked him. “Nora has it right,” he told an aide later in the day, “but France is a society of individuals, and I for one will not forget them.”²⁶

²³ Quoted in Hayward, “State Intervention in France,” 295.

²⁴ Quoted in *Le Monde*, July 28, 1969.

²⁵ For details on de Gaulle’s housing policies, see Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 370.

²⁶ Quoted in Patrick Chastenet, *Chaban* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 321.

Pompidou agreed, at least in part. That the panel disregarded the social climate of France mattered little. Besides, in his estimation, the remedy for civil unrest had more to do with the side effects of a healthy economy than with social reform. Pompidou accepted much of what the report did say, for he too believed that the economic practices set in place after the war were susceptible to change. “It is in the general interest that our firms develop their profits,” he told the National Assembly five months prior to the release of the report. “It is only upon these profits that we can develop a social policy The state must therefore diminish its hold over the economy These constraints are transient necessities from which we should escape as soon as possible.”²⁷ But July 1969 was much sooner than Pompidou would have liked. The recommendations made by Nora’s team were inconsistent with his desire to establish “continuity” and “stability” following de Gaulle’s resignation three months earlier. And even if Pompidou did feel it time to escape the “constraints” of the state, he, not a government commission, would determine how and when this transformation would take place. He implied as much during a July 10 press conference at the Elysée. After thanking Nora and his colleagues for their “insight,” he reminded the gathering that, “as the supreme head of the executive . . . it is my charge to define, to assure, and to control the direction of the public powers.” “There will be changes in the future,” he promised, but those changes had to wait until the official announcement of the Sixth Plan the following month.²⁸

In the meantime, Paris fell into the lull of a hot summer. With sunny skies and the temperature nearing 90 degrees, many Parisians embarked on their annual retreat to the cooler climate of the Alps or the warm beaches of the Côte d’Azur. For those who stayed behind,

²⁷ Quoted in *Le Monde*, March 1, 1969.

²⁸ Quoted in *Le Monde*, July 10, 1969.

newsworthy stories provided temporary distraction from the heat. Pope Paul VI had recently embarked on his month-long tour of Africa. The European swim team was enjoying great success at the international meet in Stuttgart, Germany. And the Mariner-6 spacecraft began sending back to Earth the first images of the Martian surface.²⁹ All heard, but few seemed to care when Pompidou did unveil the Sixth Plan in late August. As *Le Monde*'s front page said with some indifference, the Plan offered "no great changes" to existing economic policies.³⁰ The state would continue to control credit, prices, and interest rates. A high protective tariff would remain in place, and the government would still supervise key industries. The only tangible difference involved provisions that earmarked additional state funds to improve the country's infrastructure. According to Pompidou's Sixth Plan, the France of the future would be a more industrialized, more stable version of its former self. By mid-September, the heat had relented and vacationers returned home. Now, though, the conversation in Paris had shifted from the possibility of finding life on Mars to the possibility of Pompidou finding a new prime minister.

A Vision Blocked: The New Society

Fueling this speculation was the forty-five minute speech Chaban delivered to the National Assembly on the afternoon of September 16. Entitled the "New Society," the address hinged on what the Nora Report had already suggested: government policies were a noose around the French neck. We all know," Chaban told the 477 deputies in attendance, "that despite the competent and sometimes remarkable body, the state has become tentacular and inefficient. We must redefine its role." The recommendation, when made by Nora two months earlier, was an acceptable but untimely one for Pompidou. But when uttered by the new prime minister two

²⁹ All stories reported in *Le Monde*, August 3, 1969.

³⁰ *Le Monde*, August 26, 1969.

weeks after the president announced his more cautious Sixth Plan, the proposal to “redefine” the state bordered on treachery. Neither Pompidou nor his chief advisors had known that Chaban was drafting the New Society until they received a copy of the speech thirty minutes before the Assembly was to convene at 3 P.M.³¹ Pompidou could do little more than sit and glower as the prime minister read from a script that sounded as if it came from the hand of Nora himself. “The renovation of France after liberation,” Chaban told his colleagues, “mobilized our energies and made the state a new providence . . . but after twenty-five years . . . its methods of intervention do not allow it to meet its goals We must restore real [economic] competition and not compromise European cooperation.”

But other than endorsing the free market, the New Society bore little resemblance to the Nora Report. Redefining the state meant for Chaban more than simply adapting its policies to the economic realities of the late 1960s. State policies had to adapt to the social realities of post-1968 France as well. “There are a few moments in the existence of a people,” he said, “when one asks, what is this society in which we live?” He offered a typically blunt response. “We live in a stalled society We still have a country of castes, of excessive income differences, [and] of insufficient social mobility I believe that the conservatism of our social structures has created extreme ideologies. Too often, we fight about words rather than reality. This is why we have been unable to make reforms that have a semblance of change.” Then, with May 1968 clearly in mind, he underscored the New Society’s primary objective: “French society must advance differently if it is to avoid another major crisis. We must mobilize the nation, improve our situation, and win back the future whatever the cost.”

³¹ Chastenet, *Chaban*, 353.

Under Chaban's plan, the state would bear most of that expense. "The defective functioning of the state," Chaban told the Assembly, "and the anarchism of our social structures have been obstacles to development Our objective is to readjust these social structures." First, he proposed that the education ministry grant additional leeway to universities when determining enrollment figures and course material. "May [1968]," he recalled, "was begun by the students. Their classrooms overflowed, and they had little choices in what to learn. Our schools must be more responsive to their needs." A similar "principle of autonomy" would extend to the state broadcasting center. "The conservative character of the ORTF has guaranteed quality programming," he admitted. "But for [the ORTF] to do its job properly, its freedom should be assured, true competition should be organized, and it should be open to all." He then suggested that an "independent" director assume control of state broadcasting and that he oversee the creation of "autonomous" news channels. Chaban also recommended that privately owned companies take the place of government in the construction of public housing and regional planning. "[Private firms]," he claimed, "will be able to build and maintain housing with more efficiency than the state. Through the development of regional metropolises, they can also establish a better equilibrium between Paris and the rest of France."

However beneficial, Chaban believed institutional "readjustments" could only accomplish so much. After all, he viewed France as a "society of individuals," not of institutions. Reforms had, therefore, to be geared towards those individuals who made up what he called the "foundation" of French society, namely the working class. "Readjusting the social structures," he asserted, "also implies the transformation of professional relationships, the improvement of working conditions, and the redefinition of solidarity." The first step in achieving these goals required that union leaders and employers work with the state to form a

“tripartite management of employee services.” In effect, this triumvirate would negotiate “two- or three-year industrial contracts” that set performance targets for organized labor. Chaban also promised workers more tangible gains, including additional holidays, a reduction of the work week by one hour, and most important, an adjustment of the minimum wage (*Salarie minimum inter-professional garanti*, SMIG) to correspond to the rising cost of living. “Ultimately, we must improve the situation of the underprivileged,” he told the Assembly. “The government is committed to doing so by recalculating the SMIG and increasing base salaries.”

As if to lessen the severity of his reforms, Chaban concluded his speech by confirming that not all of the state’s prerogatives would be lost. “I believe that government has an important role to play in constructing the New Society,” he told the Assembly. “The Sixth Plan,” he said with a nod toward the president, “is indispensable if we are to meet our social ambitions.” Chaban then echoed Pompidou’s belief that the state should “stimulate world-class industrial groups,” and suggested that the Elysée create an “Institute of Industrial Development” to channel government funds to projects that improved the nation’s infrastructure. To assist in this industrial take off, he suggested that both the government and employers set aside revenue for vocational training. “For France to remain an industrial power,” he claimed, “its artisans must play a more prominent role . . . they must have the skills necessary to contribute to the production of goods and services!” The applause had scarcely subsided when Chaban made a final appeal to the deputies. “This,” he proclaimed, holding up his notes, “is to transform our country . . . this is to build a New Society founded on generosity and liberty! We need your active trust,” he told the Assembly. “Plus we need the trust and assistance of all of France.”³²

³² All statements taken from Chaban’s New Society speech are quoted in *Le Monde*, September 18, 1969.

Deputies fulfilled their half of the equation later that evening by voting 369 to 85 in favor of the New Society. Some, like the committee chair of the Gaullist party, Jean Charbonell, admitted that they supported Chaban's reforms less out of want than necessity. "We have no reason to refuse it," he told a *Le Monde* correspondent. "It cannot be worse than the results we've already had." Other deputies were more optimistic. "The speech spoke to my heart," recalled the UDR's moderate secretary-general Robert Poujade. "It is the first time that the head of government has offered a serious critique of France." The most glowing assessment of the New Society came not from members of the UDR but from those in the center. "If we accomplish half of this program, it will be well worth it," claimed prominent RI deputy Aimé Paquet. "Chaban's recommendations are clear and courageous . . . I know that I speak for my party as well as the Majority [the electoral coalition that included the RI and UDR] when I say that these measures should take effect as soon as possible."³³

Of course, Paquet's expectations were never met. The government only selectively applied portions of the New Society, and Pompidou dismissed Chaban less than three years after his September 1969 address. How was such a torrent of support reduced to a trickle within a matter of a few years? Political scientist Frank Wilson remains the only scholar attempting to explain why Paquet and the other 369 deputies who voted for the reforms never got their New Society. According to Wilson, the fruits of the UDR's electoral success poisoned Chaban and his program. "The UDR was expanding rapidly," he claimed, pointing to an additional 200,000 party members, "it was establishing a local and regional organization . . . it was adjusting to politics without de Gaulle. All this produced a tension and a discontent which . . . was

³³ All statements are quoted in *Le Monde*, September 18, 1969.

consequently aimed at Chaban-Delmas.”³⁴ While Wilson is correct to suggest that Chaban wore a target on his back during his brief tenure at the Matignon, the prime minister’s lack of success had little to do with de Gaulle’s absence or the rapid growth of his party. A more accurate explanation of why Chaban’s reforms were never implemented in full came just hours after the presentation of the New Society and from an unlikely source.

François Mitterrand, head of the Socialist party and deputy since 1946, emerged from the Assembly in the early morning hours of September 17 to notify the press that all but six of his party’s fifty-seven deputies had voted against the prime minister’s proposals.³⁵ They most strongly objected to what Mitterrand called, “Chaban’s foolish economics.” “France could never be better off with unfettered capitalism,” he told the journalists. “The state must continue to protect the people, and the people the state.” Then, as if to lecture an insolent child, he assumed a more patronizing tone. “Your party,” he said, speaking to Chaban directly, “has been in power for twelve years. You are the prime minister. The economy, which you say is weak, belongs to you and your predecessors. The politics that you condemn, you have always approved. The society that you want to reform is of your doing.” Mitterrand’s last remark revealed an insight that came from his twenty-three years in the Assembly. “When I look at you, I do not doubt your sincerity. But when I look at your party, I doubt that you will be successful because it embodies the anachronism that you so deplore.”³⁶

Mitterrand’s skepticism must have seemed misguided in light of the New Society’s enthusiastic reception. Of the 369 “yes” votes, 252 came from Gaullists, 59 from Independent

³⁴ Wilson, “Gaullism without de Gaulle,” 502.

³⁵ The actual vote on the New Society was held at 1 A.M., September 17.

³⁶ Quoted in *Le Monde*, September 18, 1969.

Republicans, and the remaining 41 from deputies representing small centrist factions and a handful of independents.³⁷ As *Le Monde* put it, the construction of the New Society certainly would be a “Herculean task,” and Chaban possessed neither the strength nor the tools necessary to complete the project alone.³⁸ But deputies from his party, its chief ally, and even those with no affiliation to the UDR appeared eager to lend a hand. Why then would Mitterrand suggest that Chaban’s own party would be the New Society’s undoing? The answer can be found when one looks more closely at the Gaullist party, starting at the top.

As leader of the Gaullists, Pompidou wore Mitterrand’s anachronistic label as he would an over-sized coat: neither fit and both concealed far too much. More prudent than passé, he was, in the words of de Gaulle, “a man inclined towards cautious attitudes and a circumspect approach.”³⁹ Little wonder, then, that Pompidou viewed the drastic reforms of New Society with great distaste. “Chaban thinks the time has come to bring in some fresh ideas,” he told his minister of education and close friend, Peyrefitte. “You can never make things anew like that! That’s a fantasy for adolescents and romantics You have to be content to take up and continue a tapestry whose framework is imposed upon you in advance.”⁴⁰ Pompidou’s “sinewy conservatism,” as one observer has termed it, even called into question the very notion of society.⁴¹ “There is no such thing as a society,” he observed. “There are only individuals and

³⁷ See *Le Monde*, September 18, 1969, for a record of the voting in the National Assembly.

³⁸ Quoted in *Le Monde*, September 18, 1969.

³⁹ De Gaulle, *Mémoires d’espoir*, 363.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Peyrefitte, *Le Mal français*, 94-95.

⁴¹ Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 449.

France Let us at least respect and protect what still holds good and what can still provide us safety – the state and the nation.”⁴²

If the French people could seek refuge within the state and nation, Pompidou believed it his duty as president to lead them there. And just as he had done when working with de Gaulle, he expected the prime minister to follow the president. “The personal authority of a prime minister is such that . . . he must never lose sight of his subordination,” Pompidou once remarked.⁴³ He therefore found it both personally offensive and politically disastrous when his own prime minister attempted to redirect the country towards the New Society. “I am the boss,” he growled after hearing Chaban’s proposals. “To allow the major decisions to be taken at the Matignon and not at the Elysée would mean that the Assembly would rapidly get the upper hand. We’d be back to the regime of parties and ministerial instability I will stand by our institutions.”⁴⁴ Although he tempered such rhetoric in public, Pompidou continued to make it clear that Chaban had overstepped his bounds as prime minister. As he told a group of reporters in late September 1969, “The New Society is obviously a broad, long-term and therefore presidential program. It belongs with me at the Elysée.”⁴⁵

The New Society not only encroached upon the president’s executive prerogatives, but it also threatened to compromise what he saw as his party’s base of support. According to Pompidou, Gaullists owed their electoral success to France’s “silent majority.”⁴⁶ Much like his American counterpart, Richard Nixon, Pompidou employed the term to refer to his party’s

⁴² Quoted in Peyrefitte, *Le Mal français*, 96.

⁴³ Pompidou, *Le Noeud gordien*, 64.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Peyrefitte, *Le Mal français*, 99.

⁴⁵ Georges Pompidou, *Entretiens et discours, 1968-1974* (Paris: Plon, 1975), 1: 240.

⁴⁶ For details on Pompidou’s view of France’s “silent majority,” see his, *Le Noeud gordien*, 151.

conservative constituency.⁴⁷ Of course, also like that of Nixon, Pompidou's "silent majority" did not represent the entirety of his electorate. Gaullist officials, including de Gaulle himself, had long touted themselves as representing "the metro crowd at rush-hour," and, indeed, voters of nearly every social and economic stripe supported the party.⁴⁸ But as opinion polls conducted both before and after Pompidou's presidency have revealed, a plurality of the Gaullist electorate firmly positioned their party on the political right.⁴⁹ Political scientist Jean Charlot reported similar findings in 1992, when he determined that the UDR consistently fared better among France's traditional conservatives like the retired, rural inhabitants, and practicing Catholics.⁵⁰ These groups, Pompidou believed, simply would not tolerate a "redefined" state or "readjusted" social structures. "When you carry out . . . policies to the detriment of your own voters," he said, referring to the New Society, "you end up losing your voters – whereas it's so much easier to hang on to your people than to catch new ones."⁵¹

Pompidou must have felt strangely justified after reading *Le Monde's* front-page story for September 18: "A Portion of the UDR Shows Skepticism towards the New Society." The title itself was far from remarkable. After all, a record of the votes cast showed that a number of

⁴⁷ I will use the terms "conservative" and "orthodox" interchangeably. Both words will be used to describe those members of the Gaullist party who were hesitant to embrace drastic reforms like those of the New Society and preferred instead that the state continue to play an active role in regulating the French economy and society.

⁴⁸ For instance, see Charlot, *The Gaullist Phenomenon*, 101-133, Robert Ponceyri, *Gaullisme electoral et Ve République: Les Elections en France depuis 1958 et la mutation du système politique* (Toulouse: Presses de l'IEP, 1985), 1: 530-539, and Frank Wilson, *French Political Parties under the Fifth Republic* (New York: Praeger, 1982), 121-140. All three studies suggest that the Gaullist party drew its support from a large cross-section of society that included voters of all ages, incomes, religions, and both genders.

⁴⁹ A 1966 public opinion poll found that 23 percent of Gaullists believed their party in the "center," 43 percent believed it on the "right," and 11 percent on the "far-right." This survey was reprinted in *Le Monde*, November 16, 1973. A 1976 poll found that 11 percent of Gaullists positioned their party in the "center," 50 percent placed it on the "right," and 25 percent on the "far-right." See *Le Monde*, September 9, 1976.

⁵⁰ Charlot, "Le Gaullisme," 682.

⁵¹ Quoted in Peyrefitte, *Le Mal français*, 96.

Gaullist deputies had refused to support Chaban's measures. But the text of the article revealed what the headline and the voting record did not. "The [New Society]," wrote the paper's Assembly correspondent, Pierre Viansson-Ponte, "failed to convince the disciplined [conservative] Gaullists . . . [and] it caused a near scandal among the 'orthodox' members of the party." A second article, also from the September 18 issue, echoed Viansson-Ponte's assertion and relayed the statements of several "orthodox" Assembly members. "The wine has been drawn," claimed UDR deputy Louis Vallon. "We need just a mouthful of what was proposed I have no confidence in the program." Another Gaullist suggested that Chaban's recommendations were "not necessary. They take one step forward and two steps back. For me, the words must have a direction." Within forty-eight hours, the New Society had gone from being the harbinger of prosperity to a dangerous intoxicant. The only way to prevent the party and the country from falling down, said UDR member Marc Jacquet, was to "reaffirm the state" and "stop the New Society."⁵²

Indeed, no party outside the political left was as dedicated to stopping the New Society as was the UDR. In all, twenty-six Gaullist deputies had either joined Jacquet in voting "no" or simply abstained. This number, it is true, represented less than 10 percent of Gaullists' parliamentary force. But the fact that a mainstream Parisian daily would publish two stories focusing on the "orthodox" members of the UDR suggests that this handful of dissenting Gaullists carried a certain weight within the party. Chaban revealed just how much weight the following morning when he entered Pompidou's office at the Elysée and asked that the independent-minded Pierre Desgraupes assume control of the ORTF. When Pompidou refused to approve the request, Chaban suggested that the president's lack of cooperation left him no

⁵² All statements quoted in *Le Monde*, September 18, 1969.

other choice but to resign. As with any head game, though, Chaban's would work only if it involved a person willing or foolish enough to participate, and Pompidou was neither willing nor foolish. Although the president claimed he could do little to get orthodox Gaullists behind the New Society, he also pledged to work with the Chaban to push through the reforms that all in the party found palatable. Thus, Chaban stayed at the Matignon, and Pompidou started a head game of his own.⁵³

However sketchy the account, the September 19 confrontation between Chaban and Pompidou does reveal much about the mindset of each man. Chaban clearly recognized that despite overwhelming support from both his party and the Assembly, the New Society would collapse without conservative backing. By threatening Pompidou – the country's highest-ranking conservative – with resignation, the prime minister hoped to force the one hand that could anoint his program. As he had demonstrated in May 1968, though, Pompidou was not the type to knuckle under to such pressure. Besides, he considered the New Society lethal to himself, his party, and his country. Yet the president could not allow his prime minister to resign after only three months in office because doing so, he believed, would give the appearance of government instability. Pompidou's retention of Chaban also suggests something of even greater importance. If the reaction of orthodox Gaullists was any indication, the administration would undoubtedly be tested in the upcoming months. Stability could not exist if the both the president and the UDR's core membership disagreed with the party's new line of attack. Pompidou had, therefore, to devise a plan of action that would marginalize the New Society without exposing the fracture between the Matignon and the Elysée.

⁵³ For details regarding this meeting, see Michel Jobert, *L'Autre regard* (Paris: Grasset, 1974), 113-114.

Phase one of Pompidou's strategy spanned the first half of his term and involved adopting those portions of the New Society that could be reconciled with the Sixth Plan. For example, the president agreed that the SMIG be recalculated to match national growth. He convinced public-sector unions to sign "contrats de progrès" (progress contracts), which set out future pay increases based on worker productivity. Pompidou also negotiated investment and production deals with some of the country's largest state-owned firms: the railways in 1969, the electric industry in 1970, and state broadcasting in 1971. That same year, he helped to establish state-funded vocational schools and, despite strong pressure from party conservatives, he even yielded to his prime minister's demands and appointed Desgraupes to the ORTF.⁵⁴ So well had Pompidou cloaked his disdain for the New Society that by 1971 he sounded more like a friend of Chaban's program than a foe. "What the prime minister calls the New Society" he told a *Time Magazine* reporter, "will create a new social relationship between [the people of France]. This will also make France a more modern country . . . and create the conditions for progress."⁵⁵

But as with many cloaks, there also existed a hidden dagger. Pompidou drew his in June 1971 when he began a quiet assault of the New Society. That month he informed Chaban that he would not champion "autonomy" for French universities. Instead, he cleverly threw his support behind the already existing Faure Law of 1968, which created 700 "autonomous" university councils but also stipulated (in article 20) that the education ministry define the general requirements for national diplomas, examinations, and grading.⁵⁶ Pompidou similarly ordered

⁵⁴ For information on the New Society reforms adopted by Pompidou, see Bridgford, "The Events of May," 112.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Pompidou, *Entretiens et discours*, 1: 111.

⁵⁶ For details on the Faure Law, see Michelle Patterson, "French University Reform: Renaissance or Reformation," in *University Reform*, ed. Philip Altbach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 136.

his junior civil service minister, Philippe Malaud, to establish an additional post within the ORTF. By April 1972, the government-appointed director-general assumed more control over broadcasting than did Desgraupes or his successor, Arthur Conte.⁵⁷ Finally, the president embarked on a campaign to eliminate the “terrorist milieux” by introducing a bill that would have nullified the famous 1901 “Association Law” permitting the free constitution of political organizations. Only stiff opposition from moderates on the constitutional council prevented this amendment from reaching the floor of the Assembly.⁵⁸

Pompidou soon discovered that along with his own efforts, his presidential staff could also help curb the policies of the wayward prime minister. Although evidence suggests that the majority of the aides in the Elysée did little to hasten the demise of the New Society, Pompidou’s two closest advisors eagerly took up the task. Marie-France Garaud and Pierre Juillet were antagonistic towards the reform package and openly hostile to Chaban. Juillet, in particular, told the prime minister that he considered him a “closet Socialist” whose program had to be “blocked.”⁵⁹ On the president’s instructions, Garaud and Juillet also oversaw a massive reshuffling within the administration. The conservative René Tomasini succeeded Robert Poujade as UDR secretary-general. Gone too was the left-leaning Roger Frey from the sensitive relations with parliament portfolio. He was replaced by hard-line Gaullist and Pompidou

Patterson claims, “the Faure reform, which was to have been the renaissance of the French university has instead found itself distorted in the university’s restoration to its former self.”

⁵⁷ See John Hayward, *The One and Indivisible French Republic* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), 146-50, for Pompidou’s handling of the ORTF.

⁵⁸ See Raymond Marcellin, *L’Importune vérité* (Paris: Plon, 1978), for a discussion of the administration’s restrictive law and order policies.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Chastenet, *Chaban*, 372.

protégé, Jacques Chirac. And Pierre Messmer, head of *Présence du Gaullisme* (Presence of Gaullism, PG) took over the top rank in ministerial protocol, minister of state.⁶⁰

Furthermore, the president offered no objections to deputies' requests for an updated version of the PG in July 1969. *Présence et Action du Gaullisme* (Presence and Action of Gaullism, PAG) initially enlisted the help the party's more right-wing elements, as well as some of Chaban's most obstinate backers. But following a massive purge in late September, only the PAG's most orthodox members remained. Labeling the New Society a "barely veiled criticism of a long period of Gaullist government," this streamlined, more conservative PAG spearheaded an attack on the prime minister at the UDR's National Council in 1969 and 1970.⁶¹ Their contempt for Chaban centered primarily on his liberalization reforms for the ORTF, which, in one member's view, had "handed the media over to the enemy."⁶² A more formal attack came in July 1971 when a group of six Gaullists circulated a pamphlet to all UDR deputies. Although not mentioning the prime minister by name, it served as a clear reminder that orthodox UDR members continued to be fundamentally opposed to Chaban's reforms. "In our country," the six deputies claimed, "where nothing great or vital has been done except under the impetus imparted by the government, the defense of the nation's general interest requires, more than ever, active state intervention."⁶³

⁶⁰ The PG (*Présence du Gaullisme*) was created in May 1969 and rumored to have been secretly administered by de Gaulle from Colombey. The organization attempted, among other things, to perpetuate the policies of de Gaulle even after his resignation.

⁶¹ Quoted in *Le Monde*, September 17, 1969.

⁶² Quoted in Philippe Boggio and Alain Rollat, *Ce terrible Monsieur Pasqua* (Paris: Orban, 1988), 126-127.

⁶³ Quoted in Hayward, "State Intervention in France," 298.

Thus did Chaban become a prisoner and Pompidou his jailor. Barred from escape, the prime minister accepted a meager political existence. Rarely did he make public statements after 1971, and, upon the president's orders, he dropped the phrase "New Society" as a label for government policy.⁶⁴ Chaban was so emasculated that during a 1971 interview with the Paris magazine *Sud-Ouest*, he conceded that the president should "define the orientations in all domains without exception."⁶⁵ If Chaban sounded like a man broken on the wheel, Pompidou sounded like his tormentor. During his customary New Year's Eve press conference, Pompidou reaffirmed the authority of the state and of the president, but could just as easily have been defending his treatment of Chaban. "The history of our people," he said with regret, "has shown individualism to the extreme. Successively, the kings, the empire, and the republic, have patiently constructed a state to protect our unity, independence, and liberty. Today we must again guarantee that security This is why the head of state must maintain authority and stability. In a world of violence and anarchy . . . a strong and stable state can guarantee liberty and justice. We need the state that we have, and you and I have the honor to serve it."⁶⁶

After enduring two years of torment, Chaban received his political death sentence on the morning of January 19, 1972. The satirical paper *Le Canard Enchaîné* claimed the prime minister had failed to pay income taxes for the years of 1967, 1968, and 1969, and had the documents to prove it. With thick letters and in tall print, the daily's front-page displayed returns showing Chaban owed approximately 53,000 francs (about \$9,700) in back taxes. Legally, the prime minister had little reason to worry since his earnings as president of the National

⁶⁴ Roussel, *Georges Pompidou*, 400.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 339.

⁶⁶ Quoted in *Le Monde*, January 2, 1972.

Assembly and as prime minister were exempt from taxation. But the situation looked bad. As a journalist writing for *L'Humanité* put it, "Chaban-Delmas does not seem to have broken any law. But how symbolic! The head of government exempted from taxes – exempted totally – while millions of workers must give the tax collector a month's salary."⁶⁷ Thus, Chaban's tax evasion may not have been wrong, but it certainly was not right. In public officials, a lack of good judgment is permissible. A lack of good character is not. Chaban showed neither judgment nor character when he attempted to defend himself during a live television broadcast on February 16, 1972. "I am the first to admit," he said, "that I did not pay taxes because, as president of the Assembly, I did not have to pay taxes I have always followed the law."⁶⁸

Such flouting of people's expectations probably would have forced the head of any other prime minister onto the president's chopping block. But Pompidou could not deliver the deathblow until Chaban had completed one final task, to rally voters in support of the referendum that would allow Britain to join the EEC. Pompidou's main objective remained to create a more industrialized nation, and he saw the regulated competition of the common market as the best way to meet this goal.⁶⁹ He also knew, however, that the more orthodox elements of the Gaullist party viewed Britain's admission as an unacceptable break with de Gaulle's foreign policies and, therefore, would not support the referendum. To offset these likely dissenters, the president needed to reach out to party moderates, and who better to do the reaching than his progressive prime minister? Chaban's temporary stay of execution did afford him the time to persuade nearly 70 percent of the people who did vote to back the government's position. But

⁶⁷ Quoted in *Le Monde*, January 21, 1972.

⁶⁸ Quoted in *Le Monde*, February 17, 1972. For details on Chaban's tax problems, see Chastenet, *Chaban*, 289-97.

⁶⁹ See Thody, *The Fifth French Republic*, 62.

the referendum failed to gain the widespread support for which president had hoped. A little more than one-third of the Gaullist electorate turned out to vote, and 30 percent of them either voided their ballot or voted “no.”⁷⁰ Calling it a “damp squib,” Pompidou considered the referendum a great personal defeat.⁷¹

Soon thereafter, Chaban made a final attempt to break free from his shackles and overpower the weakened president. He revealed his method of escape in May 1972 when he announced that he would seek a vote of confidence from the National Assembly later that month. Of course, the plan was not without risk. According to Article 50 of the French constitution, Pompidou would be required to dismiss Chaban if a majority of the deputies in the Assembly voted in favor of the motion of censure. A strong show of support, on the other hand, would demonstrate the party’s cohesion in the gloomy aftermath of the April referendum. But Chaban could also use the vote for personal gain. A clear victory would prove that he continued to have the respect of his colleagues, and would supply him added leverage when working with Pompidou. Chaban had thus but two prospects: win the vote and his freedom, or lose the vote and the premiership.

As is so often the case in politics, a third, unforeseen scenario played out. Chaban easily won his vote of confidence on the afternoon of May 23, 1972 by a vote of 396 to 96.⁷² Just as they had done upon the unveiling of the New Society three years earlier, the members of the Assembly rushed to the aid their prime minister. Yet the 396 deputies were not enough to ensure Chaban’s safe release. Citing the recent tax scandal, as well as the lack of unity within the

⁷⁰ See Alain Lancelot, “‘Il ne faut jurer de rein,’ le referendum sur l’Europe,” *Project 67* (July-August 1972): 794-808.

⁷¹ Quoted in Jobert, *L’Autre regard*, 208.

⁷² *Le Monde*, May 24, 1972.

Gaullist party, Pompidou axed Chaban six weeks after his vote of confidence.⁷³ By sacking his delinquent prime minister, Pompidou regained total control of party policy. Out were all the New Society programs not yet enacted; and in was a new prime minister, the equally qualified if more dour Pierre Messmer. His excellent Gaullist pedigree and devotion to Pompidou ensured that the UDR would retain its conservative identity. But if the party had, as one observer noted, been “dragged rightwards” following Messmer’s appointment, it was soon to be redirected.⁷⁴

A Party Like the Others: The UDR’s Final Years

On the evening of December 31, 1972, President Pompidou took to the radio airwaves and addressed the nation. He reminded his listeners not of past achievements or of his hopes for the future but of their propensity to “yield, as so often in history, to the irrational temptation of disorder and agitation.”⁷⁵ The statement, much like that of de Gaulle’s in June 1968, was not remarkable in its content. Raising the red specter had long been a favorite tactic of Gaullists when attempting to vilify those groups whom they believed fomented the “disorder and agitation” of 1968, namely the Communists. As part of the UDR’s more conservative posturing following Chaban’s dismissal, this anti-Communist campaign was much more than an attempt to frighten voters away from the political left. With legislative elections scheduled for March 1973, the UDR looked to promote party unity by dichotomizing politics into two camps: “us” and order or “them” and chaos.⁷⁶ One propaganda pamphlet entitled *The Nightmare*, for instance,

⁷³ Pompidou waited six weeks to explain his dismissal of Chaban to the press. See *Le Monde*, September 23, 1972.

⁷⁴ Alexandre Sanguinetti, *J’ai mal à peau de gaulliste* (Paris: Grasset, 1978), 12.

⁷⁵ Quoted in *Le Monde*, January 1, 1973.

⁷⁶ The Gaullist party frequently used this political tack. See Frank Wilson and Richard Wiste, “Party Cohesion in the French National Assembly: 1958-1973,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 4 (November 1976), 484-85.

warned readers that a Communist victory would lead to the replacement of Marianne by Jean-Paul Marat on postage stamps.⁷⁷ Some Gaullist deputies even suggested that selecting a left-wing candidate in March would result in privation: “stock up, if you vote for Mitterrand!”⁷⁸

Such harsh rhetoric certainly sounded unwarranted when considering that the Communist (PCF) and Socialist (PS) parties had wallowed in the doldrums of electoral defeat for decades. Only during the Popular Front of the 1930s did the left control the government, and then lasted but a single year amid a crippling wave of sit-down strikes, rampant inflation, and general political disunity. In the decades that followed, the PCF and PS continued to languish in what one historian has labeled the “Ice Age of the Left.”⁷⁹ So inhospitable were post-war years that only rarely did a leftist party net more than 30 percent of the vote in any nationwide election.⁸⁰ Voters’ attitudes towards the PCF and PS cooled even further after the events of May 1968. During the legislative elections held the following month, both parties together could muster only 20 percent of the vote.⁸¹ The “Ice Age” of the 1950s and 1960s looked to be giving way to a deep freeze in the 1970s.

The left’s lack of success was due as much to the popularity of the Gaullist party, as its own lack of unity. Relations between the PCF and PS had been chilly as far back as the 1920s when the newly formed French Communist party made clear its allegiance to Moscow and their dislike of the reform-minded Socialists. The rivalry between the two became more obvious in

⁷⁷ See Hayward and Wright, “Presidential Supremacy,” 293. Marianne is the virtuous symbol of the French Republic, who has historically represented the ideals of the French Revolution: liberty, equality, and fraternity. Marat was a radical, often times militant, journalist who lived during the Great Revolution.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Hayward and Wright, “Presidential Supremacy,” 294.

⁷⁹ Johnson, *The Long March of the French Left*, 40.

⁸⁰ See Howard Machin and Vincent Wright, “The French Left Under the Fifth Republic: The Search for Identity,” *Comparative Politics* 10 (October 1977), 37.

⁸¹ Machin and Wright, “The French Left,” 37.

1936 when Communists refused to join Socialist Léon Blum in administering the government. In 1947, the relationship was strained even further when Socialist Prime Minister Paul Ramadier dismissed his Communist ministers and, as a result, ended Tripartism, the three-way political coalition made up of the PS, the PCF, and the *Mouvement Républicain Populaire* (Popular Republican Movement, MRP). For their part, many members of the Socialist camp continued to believe the PCF a “foreign nationalist party” for being attuned to the foreign policy positions of the Soviet Union.⁸² Predictably, such accusations did little to bring the two parties closer together over policy issues like France’s membership in the EEC and its dealings with the Middle East. As political scientist Frank Wilson put it, “The greatest obstacle to the [success] of the left was the fact that both the [Communist and Socialist] parties remained fundamentally suspicious of the good intentions and reliability of their partner.”⁸³

Much had changed, however, by the time of Pompidou’s December 31, 1973 address. After years of mistrust and resentment, relations between the PCF and PS had warmed enough to allow the leaders of both party’s to make several doctrinal concessions in areas like foreign policy, and to stress the benefits of a unified left.⁸⁴ Under the leadership of prominent Socialist deputy Mitterrand, the two groups crowned their newly found partnership in June 1972 when they revealed the blueprint for a common political platform. In effect, the so-called *Programme Commun* (Common Program) mobilized the PCF and PS under the banner of “advanced democracy,” which included expanded rights for women, a higher minimum wage, and the

⁸² Léon Blum, *For all Mankind* (New York: Viking Press, 1946), 113.

⁸³ Frank Wilson, *French Political Parties*, 247-48.

⁸⁴ Of course, the factors that led to the reemergence of the left are more complex than what is presented here. For a detailed discussion, see Wilson, *French Political Parties*, 240-44 and Johnson, *The Long March of the French Left*, 136-66.

nationalization of key industries still held in private hands.⁸⁵ The program received an orgy of publicity, especially after November 1972 when the Communists and Socialists announced that their representatives would fight under a single label, the *Union de la Gauche socialiste et démocrate* (Union of the Socialist and Democratic Left, UGSD). So daunting was the emergence of the left that one Gaullist deputy admitted he and his fellow party members were “running scared” at the prospect of defeat in the March legislative elections.⁸⁶

However frightening, the UGSD and their Common Program were only part of the reason Gaullists questioned their chances of success in March. Pompidou’s ill health restricted him to brief radio addresses like that of December 31, and Messmer’s colorless oratory made him sound more like a gloating salesman than a politician. “Since 1959,” he told a gathering in November 1972, “the number of motor cars has increased by seven and a half million, there are twelve and a half million more television sets, and twelve and a half million more washing machines.”⁸⁷ When not reminding voters of their clean laundry, the prime minister took credit for the fact that the standard of living had improved by 4 percent annually over the last twenty years. Occasionally, he even read aloud from a Gaullist publication entitled *Five Years of the Legislature*, which celebrated his party’s achievements since May 1968. The inability of Gaullist leaders like Messmer to mount an effective campaign manifested itself in January 1973 when an opinion poll had just 21 percent of likely voters supporting a UDR candidate.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ For details on the Common Program, see Johnson, *The Long March of the French Left*, 85-86, 203-08, 245-47. Also, see Olivier Duhamel, *La Gauche et la Ve République* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1980), 313-21, 405-12.

⁸⁶ Quoted in *Le Monde*, December 8, 1972.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Hayward and Wright, “Presidential Supremacy,” 294.

⁸⁸ See Hayward and Wright, “Presidential Supremacy,” 295.

Worse still, the UDR had yet to formalize its electoral alliance with members of Giscard's RI party. In every nationwide election since 1962, the UDR and RI had entered into an agreement that allowed their candidates to compete against one another on the first ballot but required that both parties support the best-placed contestant on the second. Simply referred to as the Majority, this partnership worked to the advantage of both groups. For Gaullists – who typically won the plurality of first-ballot votes – the alliance helped to amplify their electoral victories, as it did during the legislative elections of June 1968. The RI, on the other hand, participated in the Majority not so much to gain votes but to acquire an influence disproportionate to its numerical strength. Despite their party's small numbers, RI officials frequently received appointments to prominent government posts after withdrawing in favor of their Gaullist competitors.⁸⁹ The agreement worked well enough to earn the RI sixty-four Assembly seats in June 1968 and Giscard the keys to the finance ministry one year later. By November 1972 Giscard was satisfied with neither situation, and that month he announced that the RI would run independently of the UDR during the March legislative elections.

Giscard's refusal to join the Majority stemmed partially from reasons of ideology. A convinced social and economic liberal, Giscard and the RI had long been uneasy allies of the Gaullist party. He did not share Pompidou's hesitancy regarding uncontrolled capitalism or drastic social reform, and encouraged instead his own vision of "pluralistic democracy." He laid out this notion in his political treatise *French Democracy*. "The new French democracy," he professed, "will be oriented toward pluralism: Political pluralism, implying a diversity of parties and institutions. Economic pluralism, signifying a rejection of monopolies and state capitalism as well as state socialism. Cultural pluralism, which stands for tolerance, diversified media of

⁸⁹ For a detailed discussion of the history and inner-workings of the Majority, see Frears, *Political Parties and Elections*, 27-33.

opinion and information, and for freedom of creation, expression, research.”⁹⁰ Giscard best described his attitude toward government in January 1967 as “yes . . . but,” to indicate that he and his party supported the Gaullist regime though not unconditionally. The philosophical rift between the RI and UDR parties grew wider later in the year when he condemned de Gaulle’s promotion of a free Quebec, and wider still in April 1969 when he informed his fellow deputies that he would not support the referendum on “participation.” This move contributed to the referendum’s narrow defeat and, ultimately, to de Gaulle’s resignation.⁹¹

Giscard’s increasingly outspoken behavior also corresponded to his and his party’s gaining popularity. By the mid-1960s, every major city had an RI federation, duties of which included organizing conferences, recruiting additional members, and contributing “new progressive ideas” to the party platform.⁹² These clubs became so successful that by 1968 the RI boasted twice as many Assembly seats as six years earlier. The party’s rapid growth also added to the celebrity of its leader. Giscard’s fame even reached across the English Channel, where the front page of *The Times* proclaimed him “A rebel with a future.”⁹³ At forty-five years of age, with thinning grey hair, and a penchant for finely tailored suits, few people probably thought Giscard a “rebel.” But even fewer could doubt his chances for success after reading a May 1970 interview in the Parisian daily *L’Express*. “My party will need five years to come out of the wilderness,” Giscard said with confidence. “We will make the most of this period by organizing a two-fold structure, political and professional for each region, politically committed and

⁹⁰ Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, *French Democracy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), xi-xii.

⁹¹ See Frears, *Political Parties and Elections*, 245, for information on Giscard’s opposition to the April 1969 referendum.

⁹² Frears, *Political Parties and Elections*, 62. See pages 60-63 for a discussion of the RI’s regional organizations.

⁹³ Quoted in Charlot, *The Gaullist Phenomenon*, 119.

professionally confident. We will soon have one hundred deputies.”⁹⁴ By November 1972, Giscard’s prophecy was all but fulfilled. According to a survey conducted that month, the RI trailed the UDR by a slim 5 percentage points.⁹⁵ He and his party needed no better reason to go it alone during the March 1973 elections.

With strong opposition from the left, a lifeless campaign, and uncooperative allies, Gaullists had little more than hope, and hope alone would do nothing to win votes. Desperate, party leaders retreated to the eastern city of Provins in early January 1973. The city’s famed church of Saint-Ayoul and walled perimeter made it the ideal location for a party in need of asylum. But, speculated J.-M. Royer, provincial correspondent for *Le Monde*, the UDR journeyed to Provins not to deliberate but to capitulate. Evoking the left’s most enduring symbol – the red rose – he playfully suggested that Messmer and the Gaullists were in search of an offering to give to the UGSD upon its victory in March. “Why did Messmer choose Provins?” Royer asked in a column entitled “The roses of Provins.” “The real reason is in the tourist guides that they [Gaullists] have found. Provins, the guides tell us, is one of the flower capitals. François Mitterrand plays the red knight like in a Richard Strauss opera [and] Pierre Messmer can do nothing less than go to the land of one hundred flowers. Thus, Provins is appropriate. The local specialty, say the tourist guides: roses.”⁹⁶

Royer could not have been more wrong. Rather than collect roses and concede defeat, the UDR gathered ammunition and went on the offensive. Messmer unveiled his party’s new tact on the morning of January 8 at the foot of a medieval tower once used by townspeople to

⁹⁴ Quoted in Charlot, *The Gaullist Phenomenon*, 119.

⁹⁵ See Hayward and Wright, “Presidential Supremacy,” 294.

⁹⁶ *Le Monde*, January 7, 1973.

rain down arrows onto unsuspecting attackers. Gaullists certainly caught their opponents unawares with the *Programme de Provins* (Provins Program), but they could not disguise the fact that theirs was a borrowed strategy. For instance, Messmer recommended that private enterprise have greater “freedom” from price controls, workers continue to earn wages that rise with inflation, and heavy industry receive additional government funding. He also proposed that labor unions work with employers and the state during collective bargaining and that companies set-aside funds for vocational training. The prime minister even went as far as to recommend that universities receive greater “autonomy” when determining enrollment figures and course options.⁹⁷ So well had Messmer captured the spirit of the New Society, and so out of character were the proposals for Pompidou’s UDR, that some members of the media found Provins unconvincing. “We all know,” claimed *Le Monde*’s lead story for January 9, 1973, “that if they [the UDR] have returned to the ideas of the New Society with Provins, it was perfected by the former prime minister [Chaban].”⁹⁸ Reporter Paul Fabra offered a scathing indictment in the same issue. “[Provins] hardly reflects the social and economic thought of ‘whites’ [conservative Gaullists] who seriously doubt the need for change,” he charged. “Their reforms are simply meant to compete with those of the left.”⁹⁹

Contrived or not, Provins did little to help the UDR come March. The party received just 26 percent of first-ballot votes, and nearly one-third of its candidates failed to move into the runoff election held one week later. Those who advanced to the second round fared better, but not by much. All told, the party held on to only 183 of its 296 Assembly seats. For its part, the RI

⁹⁷ To date, little has been written on the Provins Program. See *Le Monde*, January 9-11, 1973, for a thorough discussion of the reforms proposed.

⁹⁸ *Le Monde*, January 9, 1973.

⁹⁹ *Le Monde*, January 9, 1973.

performed better than the Gaullists and all other non-leftist parties, winning back all but seven of its sixty-four seats in the Assembly. Although the party fell far short of winning the 100 seats Giscard had predicted three years earlier, it demonstrated that it could survive outside of the Gaullist-dominated Majority. The real winners during the March elections were the combined forces of the left. The UGSD won nearly 50 percent of second-ballot votes, and the Communists and Socialist parties came away with an additional eighty seats, giving the two parties 166 in all. Even so, the gains of the left did not eliminate the UDR's hold over the Assembly, as Gaullists still controlled 183 of the 495 seats.¹⁰⁰ Peyrefitte, the Gaullist party's new secretary-general, described the outcome of the election best when he said, "We won, but with the amazement of a motorist who realizes he has just escaped an accident unscathed."¹⁰¹

Numerous scholars have attempted to explain why Peyrefitte and the Gaullists found themselves involved in an "accident" during the March 1973 legislative elections. Most typically agree with what one historian has called the left's ability "to mount a coherent governmental alternative to the [UDR]."¹⁰² Other studies, however, have looked not to the left but to the center when examining Gaullists' poor performance. "The Government," wrote Jack Hayward and Vincent Wright in November 1973, "appears to have lost few voters to the left-wing opposition: in fact it actually gained ground slightly in traditional Socialist seats. One the whole, its main competitor [was] the center The UDR was losing its popularity to [the RI]."¹⁰³ More recent studies agree. French political scientist Alain Lancelot, for instance, has

¹⁰⁰ See *Le Monde*, March 13, 1973, for election results. See Jack Hayward and Vincent Wright, "Presidential Supremacy and the French General Elections of March 1973: Part II," *Parliamentary Affairs* 3 (Winter 1973): 372-404, for a detailed discussion of the election results.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Peyrefitte, *Quand la rose se fanera*, 7.

¹⁰² Johnson, *The Long March of the French Left*, 71.

found that the Gaullist party lost nearly 20 percent of its “moderate” electorate to centrist factions like the RI between the legislative elections of June 1968 and March 1973.¹⁰⁴ Historian Andrew Knapp came to a similar conclusion in his 1994 work. “Where did the Gaullist defectors go after 1969?” he asked. “In the short term, they moved to . . . the center.”¹⁰⁵

A more important question to ask is not *where* the Gaullist defectors went after 1969 but *why*? Many observers share the viewpoint of Knapp, who believes de Gaulle’s absence drove voters from the UDR. “Pompidou,” he claims, “could expect support as the *de facto* party leader . . . but that was not the same as the more mystical attachment that bound men to de Gaulle . . . The UDR ‘label’ became less attractive to voters after 1968.”¹⁰⁶ According to historian Peter Gourevitch, however, the departure of de Gaulle had little to do with the UDR’s loss of support during the early 1970s. Instead, he has argued that Pompidou’s keen desire to promote government stability and to preserve the Fifth Republic diminished the party’s electorate. “The dropping of Chaban-Delmas is revelatory,” he wrote in 1981. “As prime minister, he tried to ‘unblock’ the ‘stalled society’ – not exactly radical, but too much for Pompidou’s cautious line . . . he sought stability.” Gourevitch briefly describes the president’s attempts to rein in Chaban’s reforms, and concludes, “The trouble with that policy [curtailing the New Society] . . . is that it sets loose a logic that gradually undermines the party. As Gaullism becomes more openly conservative . . . it drives away considerable cross class, cross party support.”¹⁰⁷ Put

¹⁰³ Hayward and Wright, “Presidential Supremacy: Part II,” 381.

¹⁰⁴ Lancelot, *Les Elections sous la cinquième République*, 287-296.

¹⁰⁵ Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 150.

¹⁰⁶ Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 247.

¹⁰⁷ Peter Gourevitch, “Gaullism Abandoned, Or The Cost of Success,” in *The Impact of the Fifth Republic on France*, eds. William G. Andrews and Stanley Hoffman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 86.

another way, when Pompidou and the conservative forces within the Gaullist party marginalized the New Society they also marginalized themselves.

Gaullists confirmed this assertion themselves when they unveiled the Provins Program in January 1973. As observers like *Le Monde* pointed out, the UDR had the former prime minister to thank for Provins. So similar were the two programs that even Chaban himself frequently referred to Provins as the “New Society” or “my program.”¹⁰⁸ *Le Monde* was also correct to suggest that the reforms presented in January 1973 were a curious *volte-face* for a party whose voters positioned it firmly on the political right, and even more curious for party officials like Pompidou who had resisted such rapid and widespread change. But Provins looks less strange when one considers the interpretation put forward by the more Gaullist-friendly *Le Figaro*. “Clearly,” Michel Bassi wrote January 9, 1973, “these reforms [Provins] are directed at the part of the Majority which refuses to be assimilated [Giscard’s RI].”¹⁰⁹ Pompidou admitted as much when speaking with Peyrefitte in January 1973. “We can no longer afford to be cautious,” he insisted. “If we want to bring [moderates] back into the party, we must now offer them what Chaban did three years ago Our conservatism ran them out, and our efforts at reform will bring them back.”¹¹⁰ Thus did the president himself draw a direct link between his party’s loss of moderate support and his own attempts to limit the New Society.

Of course, Gaullists’ attempts to lure back disaffected party members with Provins failed, as the great bulk of centrists refused to vote for UDR candidates during the March 1973 legislative elections.¹¹¹ Moderate constituents identified with Giscard’s desire for change and

¹⁰⁸ See *Le Monde*, January 9, 1973.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in *Le Monde*, January 9, 1973.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Peyrefitte, *Le Mal français*, 176.

voted instead for his party's candidates. On the other hand, only a few centrists believed that Gaullists shared the same zeal for reform. According to a survey conducted by Roy Marcrdis, for example, only 13 percent of registered RI voters believed that Gaullists would enact Provins after March.¹¹² Gaullists' lack of success during the March 1973 elections, therefore, must be viewed in two ways. As Hayward and Wright have suggested, UDR officials lost 113 Assembly seats because they "fared relatively badly" when competing against a member of the RI.¹¹³ What must be added to this assertion, however, is that Gaullists were less competitive because they were also less convincing. The refusal of party officials to encourage large-scale reforms like the New Society clearly made Provins suspect among centrists, who overwhelmingly voted for RI candidates. Indeed, Pompidou himself said it best four years earlier: "it's . . . easier to hang onto your own people than to catch new ones."¹¹⁴

While Pompidou did little to encourage large-scale reform, he did attempt to appeal to centrists by making several institutional changes during the next several months after the election. Michel Poniatowski, the RI's moderate lieutenant, took over as minister of health. Also assuming a high-profile post was Roger Frey, who just two years earlier had been demoted to the ministry of administrative reforms for his public support of the New Society. Soon thereafter, the viscerally conservative Débre left the defense ministry, and Pierre Juillet quit as presidential advisor. Only a single *Gaullistes historique*, Guichard, remained in service to the president by the end of July 1973. That same month, Pompidou made yet another gesture displaying his commitment to change by proposing a constitutional revision that would shorten

¹¹¹ See Hayward and Wright, "Presidential Supremacy: Part II," 381-82.

¹¹² See Roy Marcrdis, *French Politics in Transition: The Years After De Gaulle* (Cambridge: Winthrop Publishing, 1975), 79.

¹¹³ Hayward and Wright, "Presidential Supremacy: Part II," 381.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Peyrefitte, *Le Mal français*, 96.

the presidential term from seven years to five. His reasoning for the initiative was to “rebalance” the presidential and parliamentary terms. Favoring the simultaneous election of the executive and deputies, he argued that an Assembly elected prior to the president placed him in a position of “moral inferiority.”¹¹⁵ Although the revision passed both the Assembly and the Senate with near unanimous support from the center, enough orthodox Gaullists opposed the measure that Pompidou chose not present the proposition to Parliament (the National Assembly and the Senate sitting together) for ratification.

Gaullists made a more explicit attempt to “catch” party defectors during their November 1973 conference held in the western city of Nantes. There, the party’s new secretary-general, Alexandre Sanguinetti, emphasized the need for the UDR to adapt to France’s changing political environment. The bulk of party delegates clearly agreed. To boisterous applause, Sanguinetti urged Gaullists “to reaffirm their support” for Provins, and he declared, “We are the party of change!”¹¹⁶ Of course, the party’s more conservative elements also appeared at Nantes. Agriculture minister Chirac, for instance, assumed Pompidou’s mantra by insisting, “The key to our institutions belongs to the president of the Republic To attack him . . . is to attack the regime and its ambitions.” Other party conservatives like Debré, however, conceded that “The party must reach to the right *as well as* the center . . . [or] there will be no more UDR deputies, no more UDR secretaries of state, no more UDR ministers . . . because there will no longer be a large UDR movement to understand and to support most [people’s] opinions.”¹¹⁷ The statements of Chirac, and especially those of Debré, confirmed that the Gaullist party continued to look to

¹¹⁵ Quoted in Rials, *Les Idées politiques*, 164.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in *Le Monde*, November 19, 1973.

¹¹⁷ All quotes are from *Le Monde*, November 20, 1973.

its conservative constituency for support. Still, Sanguinetti's call for change set the tone for the conference. Gaullists underscored this commitment by welcoming back the party's most staunch champion for change, Chaban.

The former prime minister figured so prominently at the Nantes national conference that *Le Monde's* lead story for November 20, 1973 declared that he had "retaken control of the UDR."¹¹⁸ Another newspaper, *La Nation*, viewed the return of Chaban as solidifying the party's more moderate outlook. Its November 19 headline labeled the meeting at Nantes "The Revolutionary Conference for the New Society."¹¹⁹ Although clearly an embellishment, the title highlighted the party's determination to broaden its support base to include centrists. For his part, Pompidou was both unable and unwilling to stop Chaban's return to the party. His ill health had not permitted him to make the journey to Nantes, and he, like Debré, believed the party had either to embrace reform or face extinction. In a dictated note, which arrived at the conference on its final day, the ailing president asked that a leader step forward. "We need someone," he said, "to renew people's confidence" in the UDR.¹²⁰ That someone became Chaban. His November 20 speech, eerily reminiscent to the one he delivered four years earlier, demanded that the party remain true to the "themes of the New Society" in order to maintain "France's prosperity."¹²¹ Over a roaring ovation, he concluded his address by announcing his candidacy for the presidential election in 1976.

Chaban's startling proclamation of his presidential ambitions was made even more significant by its timing. Just four weeks earlier, Arab members of OPEC announced a boycott

¹¹⁸ *Le Monde*, November 20, 1973.

¹¹⁹ Quoted in *Le Monde*, November 20, 1973.

¹²⁰ Quoted in *Le Monde*, November 20, 1973.

¹²¹ Quoted in *Le Monde*, November 20, 1973.

of nations that supported Israel in its war against Egypt. Already troubled by rising inflation and high unemployment, top oil-consuming countries like the United States, Great Britain, and France bore the initial brunt of the embargo. Soaring oil prices, coupled with the general economic slowdown, had already prompted British Prime Minister Edward Heath to freeze wages and prices and President Richard Nixon to release the dollar from the fluctuating gold standard. Pompidou, on the other hand, deliberately followed a pro-Arab policy and pressured the French Petroleum Company (CFP) to maintain their oil deliveries to France at the expense of supply commitments to other countries. Even so, France received little more oil than other Western nations, and, by the time that Gaullists met for their national conference in late November 1973, the price of oil had nearly doubled, inflation exceeded 13 percent, and the value of the franc dropped by 5 percent.¹²² If the French public suspected the Gaullists desire for change in January 1973, they could not by the end of the year. “This situation will not go on indefinitely,” vowed Messmer, referring to the recent economic downturn. “The government will take the necessary measures, and our situation will improve.”¹²³

As went the economy, so went Pompidou’s health. In the months after his party’s conference at Nantes, the president grew increasingly sluggish and looked worse. His weekly cortisone injections had so swollen his face that, according to one staffer, he appeared to have gained more than fifty pounds during his four years as president. The rest of his body had also begun to betray his infirmity as early as May 1973. That month, before a gathering of reporters and television cameras, he descended shakily from his presidential aircraft to meet President Nixon at Reykjavik, Iceland. Several months later, he could hardly stand during his visit to the

¹²² For details, see Lieber, “Energy Policies of the Fifth French Republic,” 180-81.

¹²³ Quoted in *Le Monde*, November 20, 1973.

Chinese capital at Peking.¹²⁴ Still, only Pompidou's wife and children were certain of his illness and of its gravity. The rare cancer known as Waldenström's disease caused massive swelling in Pompidou's liver and, by January 1974, formed tumors within his bone marrow. Compromised by the ravages of the disease, Pompidou's immune system simply could not endure the bacterial infection that he contracted in the final weeks of March. He died on April 2, 1974. Messmer praised him as a "true hero." Mitterrand saluted him as a "patriot." But it was Chaban, the self-proclaimed heir to the Gaullist throne, who offered Pompidou the most fitting eulogy of them all. "More than anything," he said, "Pompidou was determined not to allow France to suffer after the departure of de Gaulle. We shall forever be indebted to him for that."¹²⁵

¹²⁴ See *Le Monde*, April 4, 1974, for details.

¹²⁵ All quotes are from *Le Monde*, April 4, 1974.

Chapter 3: A Not so New Era

Giscard Emerges: The 1974 Presidential Election

“A strange fog has descended upon the whole of France,” wrote Pierre Drouin in the April 4, 1974 edition of *Le Monde*. “Heavy in the air hangs a gloom caused by the death of our president, Georges Pompidou With time,” Drouin assured his readers, “our despair will lift and a new and capable leader will emerge to lead France into the future. Until then, we can only stare into the fog.”¹ And “stare” they did. France appeared transfixed by news of Pompidou’s death, details of his illness, and speculation regarding his political legacy in the days after his passing. Stories about Britain’s renewed efforts to join the EEC were bumped from *Le Monde*’s front page.² The opening stages of the Tour de France received only passing mention.³ And the landing of Mariner 10 on Mercury seemed of little importance.⁴ As with anyone lost in a fog, the only object visible to French men and women during the first week of April 1974 was that which lay directly before them, and nothing was more immediate than the death of their president. Nearly 100,000 mourners lined the Champs-Élysées on the afternoon of April 6, 1974 to watch as a motorcade transported Pompidou’s body to the church of St.-Louis-en-l’Île.

People could do little else but stare when Chaban began his election campaign just hours after attending Pompidou’s memorial service. With typical bravado, the former Gaullist prime minister defended his hasty announcement by reminding voters that France had but three weeks until a general election would determine the next president. “April 28 draws near, and a

¹ *Le Monde*, April 4, 1974.

² Compare the front page of *Le Monde*, April 2, 1974 to its front page the following day.

³ See the article entitled, “Stage two complete,” in *Le Monde*, April 6, 1974.

⁴ See the small article on this topic in *Le Monde*, April 5, 1974.

discussion of the issues must begin at once I am beginning that discussion here and now,” he declared from the front steps of the Palais Bourbon, the meeting place of the French National Assembly. Of course, much of Chaban’s “discussion” involved the reforms he had proposed five years earlier. “I firmly believe,” he said with as much expectancy as ego, “that my New Society is the future of France.” After reiterating the key features of his reform package, including greater autonomy for universities, the privatization of certain businesses, and additional benefits for industrial workers, Chaban concluded the brief press conference by appealing directly to French voters: “My reforms . . . will transform our country and will create a society founded on generosity and liberty A vote for me on April 28 is a vote for the New Society.”⁵

However inspiring, not all UDR officials supported Chaban or his calls for sweeping change. Labeled the “Pompidolien clan” by reporter Thomas Ferenczi, those Gaullists who refused to back the former prime minister believed Pompidou had been correct to undermine the New Society in years past.⁶ They, too, considered Chaban’s plans for drastic social reform harmful to France and were hesitant to loosen the state’s hold over the economy. Political ideology aside, they also chose not to endorse Chaban because they believed he had little chance to win the presidency. After all, he had suffered from an embarrassing tax scandal in February 1972, and since then, his divorce from a second wife had some Parisian circles accusing the former prime minister of infidelity.⁷ Members of the Pompidolien clan felt that such indiscretions – whether real or imagined – would render Chaban suspect in the eyes of French voters and perhaps allow a less desirable candidate to capture the Elysée. With the candidacy of

⁵ Quoted in *Le Monde*, April 7, 1974.

⁶ *Le Monde*, April 6, 1974.

⁷ See *Le Monde*, January 18, 1974, for details about Chaban’s divorce.

Mitterrand appearing likely, the group thus set out to find a contender whom they believed capable of defeating the popular Socialist.⁸ Leading their search was the forty-one-year-old Jacques Chirac.

Nicknamed “the bulldozer” by fellow Gaullists, Chirac was an energetic and determined man who hailed from the rugged Limousin region of France. Of average height and medium build, he had broad features and sported thick, dark hair, which he neatly combed to one side. Yet, like his friend Pompidou, Chirac’s provincial roots and earthy looks were hardly indicative of his political capacity, for he was, as one observer noted, “a complex man, partly sly, partly smart, and wholly ambitious.”⁹ Indeed, Chirac’s highly-driven nature was obvious to all who worked with him. As Pompidou once remarked playfully, “if I asked [Chirac] to dig a tunnel from the Elysée to the Palais Bourbon . . . I would expect to wake up the next morning and see the work already well advanced, and Chirac would expect to be well rewarded.”¹⁰ However absurd, such a project could only be undertaken by someone with a unique character. He had to be forceful enough to plow through miles of earth and coarse enough to accept that he would get dirty while doing it. Chirac was both.

Of course, a bulldozer also requires someone to give it direction, as did Chirac. While Pompidou did not dictate his every move, he certainly held much sway over his fellow Gaullist. The president exerted so much influence over him, in fact, that Chirac often referred to himself as Pompidou’s “protégé,” and he adhered passionately to the president’s more orthodox brand of Gaullism.¹¹ For instance, Chirac believed that the state played a crucial role in making France

⁸ See the article, “Mitterrand run likely,” in *Le Monde*, April 6, 1974.

⁹ Quoted in Maurice Szafran, *Chirac ou les passions du pouvoir* (Paris: Grasset, 1986), 4.

¹⁰ Quoted in Thody, *The Fifth French Republic*, 134.

great. “No nation,” he once remarked, “owes more to its state than France the state has been the determining factor for French unity and stability.”¹² Not surprisingly, he also thought the drastic social reforms such as those of the New Society potentially damaging to the country. Thus, Chirac assisted the president’s efforts to undermine Prime Minister Chaban and, in doing so, he advanced quickly through the UDR ranks. In 1969, Pompidou appointed him to a low-level post in the finance ministry, a year later to minister responsible for relations with parliament, and then in 1972 to minister of agriculture. The bond that existed between the two men became even more apparent in November 1973 when the ailing Pompidou sent Chirac in his stead to the UDR’s conference at Nantes. Unlike most of the speakers, the agriculture minister made no mention of Chaban’s triumphant return to the party and focused instead on the primacy of the executive. “The key to our institutions,” he insisted, “belongs to the president of the Republic To attack him . . . is to attack the regime and its ambitions.”¹³ Four months later, the president chose Chirac to become minister of the interior after its director, Raymond Marcellin, had been implicated in the bugging of the *Canard Enchaîné* offices.

Chirac immediately flexed the muscles of his new post. During his first week on the job, he replaced the Paris police prefect and six of France’s twenty-two regional prefects. Chirac then attempted to distance himself from Marcellin, declaring that his office would suspend all wire tapping activities and assume a less prominent role in the “policing” of France. “The traditional duty of the [minister of the interior],” he reminded reporters on March 17, “has always involved the domains of the police I will continue to maintain order . . . but I will

¹¹ For details on their relationship, see Szafran, *Chirac*, 67-72.

¹² Quoted in Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 405.

¹³ Quoted in *Le Monde*, November 19, 1973.

also inform the character and the direction of the state.”¹⁴ Exactly how he intended to “inform” the French state became evident only after Chaban entered the race for president three weeks later. During a meeting with staffers on the morning of April 7, Chirac warned that the former prime minister was a “weak” candidate.¹⁵ Later that afternoon, he made more public his opposition to Chaban’s candidacy when he assembled a group of fellow Pompidoliens at the Matignon. Considering himself too young for a run at the presidency, Chirac joined Education Minister Peyrefitte, Justice Minister Jean Tattinger, and nine of their cohorts in the private office of Pierre Messmer, where they attempted to persuade the sixty-two-year-old prime minister to place his name on the April 28 ballot.

Messmer was initially hesitant. As he had discovered during the legislative elections held the previous year, he possessed neither the oratory skills nor the personal charm necessary to conduct a nationwide election with much success. Still, he had never agreed with the basic tenets of the New Society, and as Chirac reminded him, his was an enviable position. “Pompidou selected you as his prime minister, and you have served dutifully for the last two years You, more than anyone else,” Chirac said, pointing to the eleven Gaullists who had gathered at the Matignon that morning, “have the skills to be president.” Chirac then put aside all pretense, placed both hands on Messmer’s desk, and revealed the group’s true motivation. “Look,” he exclaimed, demonstrating his forthright demeanor, “none of us here like Chaban Besides, he is a weak candidate who has no real chance of winning.” After mentioning the tax scandal that had plagued the final months of Chaban’s premiership, Chirac attempted to reassure the prime

¹⁴ Quoted in *Le Monde*, March 18, 1974.

¹⁵ Quoted in Philippe Desjardins, *Un inconnu nommé Chirac* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1983), 272.

minister. “You will easily defeat him, Pierre.”¹⁶ Messmer announced his candidacy the next morning, April 8.

Yet the prime minister soon had more than just Chaban with whom to concern himself. Besides two Trotskyites (Alain Kirvine and Arlette Laguiller), two European Federalists (Jean Claude Sébag and Guy Héraud), and the Gaullist mayor of Tours (Jean Royer), seven other candidates added their name to the ballot on April 9. More troublesome for Messmer was news that Mitterrand would declare his candidacy the following day. The Socialist had won more than 35 percent of the vote during the presidential election of 1965, and his Common Program had helped the left make substantial gains during the legislative elections of March 1973. Even so, neither Messmer nor Chaban expected Mitterrand’s candidacy to have such an immediate impact. Heeding Mitterrand’s call for unity on the left, the general secretary of the French Communist Party, Georges Marchais, instructed rank-and-file members to back the Socialist candidate on April 11.¹⁷ A poll released the following day showed that Mitterrand had already opened up a commanding lead over his two main rivals. Nearly 40 percent of those surveyed said they supported Mitterrand and his call for expanded women’s rights, a higher minimum wage, and the nationalization of key industries. Chaban’s 23 percent and Messmer’s 11 percent paled in comparison.¹⁸ Fearing that he and Chaban would divide the UDR vote and allow Mitterrand an easy victory, Messmer ended his four-day candidacy “out of loyalty to the party.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Quoted in Peyrefitte, *La Mal français*, 203.

¹⁷ See *Le Monde*, April 12, 1974.

¹⁸ See *Le Monde*, April 13, 1974.

¹⁹ Quoted in *Le Monde*, April 13, 1974.

Chirac and fellow members of the Pompidolien clan suddenly found themselves facing a dilemma. Messmer's early departure from the race meant that Chaban would likely receive the majority of the Gaullist vote on the first ballot and thus advance to the second round. Yet if recent opinion polls were any indication, Chaban had little chance to overtake Mitterrand. Chirac's worst fears were quickly becoming a reality. "We have two weeks until the first ballot!" he howled during a meeting with Peyrefitte and Tattinger on the afternoon of April 12. "Mitterrand will run away with [the election] if we fail to act now." Peyrefitte readily agreed but doubted anything could be done. Backing Chaban would lead to defeat, and fielding another UDR candidate would likely divide the Gaullist vote even further. Tattinger resigned himself to the fact that Mitterrand would win the election. "I can think of no one who is capable of defeating [Mitterrand]," he told the two men. "Barring a miracle, he will be our next president."²⁰ With that statement, Chirac hurriedly left the room, returned to his office at the ministry of the interior, and placed a telephone call to the minister of finance, Giscard.

That Chirac would contact the RI leader was not extraordinary. The two men knew each other well after serving in the president's cabinet, and they had worked closely together during Chirac's brief tenure at the finance ministry. There, they helped devise budgets, fixed tariff rates, and oversaw the financial aspects of Pompidou's Sixth Plan such as the increase in the minimum wage (SMIG). Even after the president appointed Chirac minister of agriculture in 1972, the two maintained close contact, frequently conferring on topics like farm subsidies and general economic policy.²¹ Yet Chirac had little intention of discussing their past collaboration when he phoned Giscard on the afternoon of April 12. Although the details of their conversation

²⁰ Quoted in Peyrefitte, *La Mal français*, 209-210.

²¹ For details on their relationship prior to the May 1974 presidential election, see Szafran, *Chirac*, 102-04.

have yet to be published, the RI leader was evidently moved by the hour-long exchange; he formally announced his candidacy from the front steps of the finance ministry the next morning.²² Standing just to his right was Chirac.

The partnership was not without its oddities. While Chirac could be brash and, at times, even crude, Giscard carried himself with a certain detachment and refinement that bordered on vanity. The finance minister preferred custom-made suits and shoes. He boasted degrees from the *Ecole polytechnique* as well as the *Ecole national d'administration*. And he was so confident, said one observer, that he appeared “relaxed even in tensest of situations.”²³ Whereas Chirac prided himself on representing *la France profonde* or the broad mass of people, the RI leader embodied the upper crust of French society. He was born into wealth, and his father believed himself a distant relative of the illegitimate niece of Count Charles Henri d’Estaing.²⁴ Although the Association of French Nobility had never recognized his family’s claim to the noble d’Estaing title, Giscard strengthened his elitist ties when he married the great-granddaughter of a prosperous steel magnate in 1952. Together, he and wife Anne-Aymone Sauvage de Brantes owned a castle in the Loir-et-Cher, a chalet in the mountainous Massif Central, and a fifteen-room *hôtel particulier* (town house) in Paris’ fashionable sixteenth arrondissement. Yet for all his affluence, Giscard was never a champion of privilege. He valued hard work above heritage, intelligence over inheritance, and change as opposed to the political status quo. More than anything else, Giscard’s desire for far-reaching reform was what distinguished him most from his Gaullist backer.

²² Giscard insists that he would have entered the race prior to April 13 but preferred that his candidacy “emerge” naturally. See, for instance, his statement quoted in *Le Monde*, April 5, 1974.

²³ Quoted in Abadie and Corcelette, *Valéry Giscard d’Estaing*, 12.

²⁴ For details on Giscard’s background, including his ties to the French aristocracy, see Abadie and Corcelette, *Valéry Giscard d’Estaing*, 1-17.

Indeed, Giscard's views seemed more in line with those of Chaban than Chirac. For example, the finance minister promised to "adapt France to the market economy" by removing price restrictions, lowering tariff rates, and privatizing French industry.²⁵ Giscard also pledged to limit the influence of the state in order to create a more "open and tolerant" society.²⁶ He recommended that private firms assume responsibility of the Office of French Radio and Television (ORTF). He suggested that the education ministry grant additional leeway to French schools and universities when determining enrollment figures and course material. The finance minister also proposed that privately owned companies take the place of government in the construction of public housing and regional planning. So similar were the proposals made by Giscard and Chaban that people hardly distinguished between the two platforms. "They appear," said a journalist, referring to the two men, "to be pedaling almost identical agendas."²⁷ French voters also drew little distinction between the reforms put forth by Giscard and Chaban. An opinion poll released several days prior to the election showed that 80 percent of people surveyed saw "little or no difference" between the Chaban's New Society and Giscard's so-called "Advanced Liberal Society" program.²⁸

Yet one major difference set the two plans apart: the men proposing them. On one hand, Chaban was a former prime minister who had been fired by the president just two years earlier. He had appeared indifferent if not immodest when explaining his failure to pay income taxes in February 1972. And, according to one observer, his youthful good looks and recent marital problems made him appear "slightly raffish and lightweight . . . lacking the *gravitas* or stature of

²⁵ Quoted in *Le Monde*, April 14, 1974.

²⁶ Quoted in *Le Monde*, April 14, 1974.

²⁷ *Le Monde* April 23, 1974.

²⁸ See *Le Monde*, May 2, 1974.

a de Gaulle or even a Pompidou.”²⁹ While Giscard may not have measured up to past presidents, the French public did hold him in high regard. Opinion polls suggested that voters considered the finance minister competent, intelligent, and trustworthy. French men and women also liked the fact that Giscard’s political career had yet to be tarnished by public scandal or controversy. And, most important, surveys conducted prior to the presidential campaign showed the RI leader to be more popular than Chaban.³⁰

Chirac’s gamble appeared to be paying off. He had fielded a candidate whom the public preferred over his fellow Gaullist. To improve the odds, though, the interior minister used the powers afforded his high office to ensure that Giscard and not Chaban moved onto the second ballot.³¹ Chirac exercised his right to push back the date of the election from April 28 to May 5, thereby allowing Giscard more time to pull ahead. He then released prematurely the findings of several opinion polls conducted by his aides that suggested Chaban would lose to Mitterrand on the second ballot. He even prohibited Gaullist staffers at the ministry of the interior from taking leave to help with Chaban’s campaign. The most damaging blow to Chaban’s presidential ambitions came three weeks prior to the election when Chirac leaked to the press the “Declaration of the 43.” Signed by Chirac, three other UDR ministers, and thirty-nine deputies, the memorandum instructed all Gaullists to vote for Giscard on the first ballot, insisting that only he could defeat Mitterrand, the “socio-communist” candidate, on the second.³² To be sure, such actions infuriated party moderates like Sanguinetti, who “swore to have Chirac’s hide” for

²⁹ Johnson, *The Long March of the French Left*, 88.

³⁰ For details on the public’s perception of Giscard, see Marcrdis, *French Politics in Transition*, 104.

³¹ In France, the minister of the interior is involved in nearly every aspect of the election process. He sets the date for both the first and second ballots, collects the ballot boxes, and issues the official results of the voting. For details, see Johnson, *The Long March of the French Left*, 88-89, 297-98.

³² For details, see *Le Monde*, April 22, 1974. Also, see Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 40.

sabotaging Chaban.³³ But by the time the “Declaration” reached the press on April 21, Sanguinetti could do little to help the party’s candidate. A poll conducted a week later revealed that Giscard had overtaken Chaban in the polls.³⁴

Chirac’s maneuvering so wounded Chaban that the former prime minister won a slightly less than 3.6 million votes, 15 percent of the total. Although he fared better than the majority of the field, Chaban could not surpass Giscard. The RI leader netted 8.3 million votes or 32 percent. For his part, Mitterrand nearly exceeded the left’s performance during the legislative elections held the year before, winning 10.9 million ballots, 43 percent, and placing first among the three major competitors. Because the constitutional amendment of 1962 instituted direct election of the president in a two-ballot contest – the second of which was limited to the top two voter-getters – only Giscard and Mitterrand moved onto the May 19 run-off.³⁵ Chaban could not help but feel cheated. “Giscard only has Chirac to thank To sabotage my campaign, as Chirac has done, is unforgivable.” Still, Chaban could not bring himself to support Mitterrand: “I will vote for Giscard in two weeks,” he told reporters after learning the results of the first ballot. “But,” he warned, “one would be foolish to assume that my supporters will do the same.”³⁶

Certainly, chances were good that Gaullist voters would not support the leftist Mitterrand, but chances were just as good that they would not go to the polls at all. As one journalist writing for *Le Monde* put it, Giscard’s “past indiscretions” rendered him suspect in the eyes of

³³ Quoted in Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 41.

³⁴ See *Le Monde*, April 14, 1974, for the results of the survey.

³⁵ For details on the results of the May 5, 1974 election, see *Le Monde*, May 6, 1974. Also, see Marcridis, *French Politics in Transition*, 110-13.

³⁶ Quoted in *Le Monde*, May 6, 1974.

the UDR electorate. “In relation to the founder of the Fifth Republic [de Gaulle],” he reminded, “Giscard – the man who in 1967 shook him with his ‘yes . . . but’ and in 1969 with his ‘no’ [to the referendum on “participation”] appears to Gaullists as a parricide.”³⁷ Writing as the “anonymous Gaullist,” another person also alluded to the less than cordial relations between Giscard and the Gaullist party. “Giscard has not been a friend to [the UDR] for the last several years He may have been Pompidou’s minister of finance, but before then he was a traitor to our cause He undermined the Majority when he criticized de Gaulle . . . and he destroyed it when his party ran independently during the [legislative] elections of 1973.” The closing statement offered by “anonymous” could not have been clearer: “Gaullists can vote Giscard, but they do so at their own risk.”³⁸

To dispel such claims, Giscard spent the two weeks prior to the May 19 run-off by portraying himself as a safe choice for UDR voters. He emphasized that his RI party had long been an ally of the government and that he had served proudly as finance minister since 1969. Giscard also unveiled new campaign slogans meant to appeal to the more orthodox members of the Gaullist party. While he remained adamant about his desire to rollback the French state, he rarely referred to his Advanced Liberal Society by name and used instead phrases like “openness and continuity,” “freedom and order,” and “change without risk” to describe his plans for the future. Giscard even employed a tactic often used by Gaullist officials in years past, as he characterized Mitterrand’s Common Program as “fanciful” and “dangerous.”³⁹ According to Giscard, his opponent’s plans to nationalize industry would “arrest thirty years of economic

³⁷ Quoted in *Le Monde*, May 7, 1974.

³⁸ Quoted in *L’Express*, May 8, 1974.

³⁹ For instance, see Giscard’s speech in *Le Monde*, May 12, 1974.

development” and reduce France to a “third-world country.”⁴⁰ Finally, he warned that Mitterrand’s first order of business as president would be to dissolve the Gaullist-dominated National Assembly. Giscard, of course, pledged not to do the same if elected. “I intend to work with the Assembly [elected in] March 1973 I will not dissolve the National Assembly, and I will not call for new elections.”⁴¹

Giscard also invited the Gaullists’ top public relations man, Jacques Hintzy, to help with his campaign. Hintzy’s efforts to make the centrist more appealing to voters were readily apparent. For instance, Giscard traded his expensive Italian suits for shirtsleeves and a simple tie. He also switched his leather shoes for a pair black Loafers. He exchanged his heavy, black glasses for a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles. In an effort to look more average than academic, Giscard also employed the help of his family. They made frequent appearances at campaign stops, and his wife, Anne, traveled to the French Caribbean to rally supporters. His four children, Henri, Louis-Joachim, Valérie-Ann, and Jacinthe, were featured prominently on the thousands of full-length billboards posted across the country. Hintzy even had a Paris shop print tee-shirts with the memorable phrase “Giscard à la barre” (Giscard to the helm) emblazoned across the chest. No doubt, few people could forget the slogan after the actress Bridgette Bardot appeared in a Parisian newspaper wearing nothing more than a smile and nearly transparent “Giscard à la barre” top a day before the election.⁴²

Giscard’s margin of victory was as thin as Bardot’s tee-shirt. Of the 26 million French men and women who voted, 50.8 percent or 23.1 million chose the centrist. While Mitterrand

⁴⁰ Quoted in *Le Monde*, May 11, 1974.

⁴¹ Quoted in *Le Monde*, May 14, 1974.

⁴² For details on Giscard’s personal transformation during the 1974 presidential election, see J.R. Frears, *France in the Giscard Presidency* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981,) 14-15.

managed to recover much of the support he had lost to the Trotskyites Kirvine and Laguiller on the first ballot, he failed to rally enough non-leftist voters on the second. A slim 2 percent of Gaullists defected to the Socialist's camp. Other than the 30,000 who abstained, almost 90 percent of UDR voters chose Giscard. Their overwhelming support supplied him the additional 400,000 votes necessary to defeat Mitterrand. Of course, the closeness of the election made Mitterrand's loss that much more unbearable for his supporters. Some demanded that Giscard dissolve the National Assembly in hopes that new elections would sweep the left into power. Others insisted that Giscard appoint Mitterrand prime minister to reflect the country's polarized electorate.⁴³ Yet the left could not deny the fact that Giscard had just won the closest presidential election in the country's history. As his biographer, Olivier Todd put it, "To reach the Elysée as he did, Giscard used the sharpness of his intellect, his capacity for farsightedness, his vanity, his self-esteem . . . and his reserves of power. The great cat has advanced slowly and stealthily through the long grass of politics. Now he is in the open."⁴⁴ And with him came the prospect of political reform.

Stagflation and Social Reform: 1974-1976

On the morning of May 27, 1974, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing began his day by setting out on foot down Paris' most celebrated thoroughfare, the Champs-Élysées. The path had been traveled many times before by men in his position. De Gaulle had made the trek from the Arc de Triomphe to the Place de la Concorde after becoming the Fifth Republic's first democratically elected president in December 1965. Pompidou had taken the same route when he succeeded de Gaulle four years later. While Giscard may have been following in the footsteps of past leaders

⁴³ For details on the left's reaction to the May 1974 presidential election, see *Le Monde*, May 21-25, 1974.

⁴⁴ Olivier Todd, *La Marelle de Giscard* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1977), 482-83.

during his trip along the Champs-Élysées that morning, he looked and acted like no president the Fifth Republic had ever seen. He did not wear a drab morning coat as had de Gaulle and Pompidou but a pair of khaki trousers and a blue beret. While his predecessors had acknowledged spectators from the back seat of an open-air car, Giscard, his wife, and their four children walked, occasionally shaking hands with individuals in the crowd. The new president even requested that the band flanking him and his family reduce the tempo of the country's national anthem. The *Marseillaise* thus changed from of a hard and fast military march to gentle saunter.⁴⁵

Forty-five minutes after he began, Giscard reached his new home at the Elysée Palace. There, the president of the constitutional council, Roger Frey, read the words that made Giscard's presidency official: "The constitutional council has certified the election of May 19 and has confirmed that you have won an absolute majority of the votes cast . . . I have the honor to proclaim you the elected president of France."⁴⁶ Across the Place de la Concorde, in the garden of the Tuileries, twenty cannon shots rang out. Giscard then delivered his first speech as president of France. "Today begins a new era for our country," he began. "This proclamation is made in honor of France's long and glorious past . . . It is made with respect for the millions of voters who had the confidence to select me as the twentieth president of the Republic . . . But most of all, I pronounce today, May 27, 1974, the dawning of a new era for all of the country's men and women, youths and elders, workers and the retired, who have each said in their own

⁴⁵ For details, see *Le Monde*, May 28, 1974.

⁴⁶ Quoted in *Le Monde*, May 28, 1974.

way and according to their own preference that they desire change I will direct this change. But I will not direct it alone Together, we will make a brighter future.”⁴⁷

However forward-looking his vision, the president revealed later that evening just how little room he had to maneuver. As he had on May 14, Giscard affirmed publicly that he would not dissolve the UDR-dominated National Assembly.⁴⁸ The pledge, when made two weeks earlier, was primarily a political expedient. Giscard knew that winning the presidential election also meant winning Gaullist votes, but now the retention of the Assembly was as much a practicality as it was a necessity. After all, Mitterrand’s strong performance suggested that the left could make significant gains if the president called for new legislative elections. An Assembly dominated by Socialists and Communists would no doubt be hostile to an agenda that centered on rolling back the French state. Yet the president could not disregard the left either. Giscard’s own party, the RI, held just fifty-seven Assembly seats and was thus too small to act as an adequate base of support. The UDR, on the other hand, controlled 183 seats, but its cooperation with a non-Gaullist president was not guaranteed. Therefore, Giscard had little choice but to seek an extension of his political base to include at least some of the 166 Socialist and Communist deputies in the Assembly.

To work with the Gaullists, Giscard had to appoint a prime minister capable of befriending them. Of course, this requirement immediately ruled out the left’s first choice for the job, Mitterrand.⁴⁹ While appointing him certainly would have done much to appease leftists in the aftermath of the close election, his calls for expanded women’s rights, a higher minimum

⁴⁷ Quoted in *Le Monde*, May 28, 1974.

⁴⁸ See *Le Monde*, May 28, 1974.

⁴⁹ See *Le Monde*, May 21, 1974, for details regarding Mitterrand’s chances to receive the post.

wage, and the nationalization of key industries had long been criticized by Gaullists. Giscard could likewise not appoint prominent RI deputy and close friend Michel Poniatowski. While Poniatowski had served as minister of health in the Pompidou government, he had been so antagonistic towards UDR officials recently that he often spoke of the day when “the Gaullists [would] come and kneel at [Giscard’s] feet.”⁵⁰ The only way to ensure friendly relations with the UDR, Giscard reasoned, was to appoint a Gaullist prime minister, and no Gaullist seemed more right for the job than Chirac. After all, his maneuvering had helped Giscard win the election, and Chirac’s belief that the president – not the prime minister – held “the key” to France’s institutions suggested that he would act as a Giscard’s dutiful servant. Accordingly, Giscard appointed Chirac prime minister on the evening of May 27.

Thus did Giscard find himself in a position similar to that of Pompidou after his election in June 1969. Believing that he lacked the charismatic leadership abilities of de Gaulle, Pompidou felt compelled to appoint Chaban prime minister. A *Gaulliste historique*, Chaban had been a close companion of the former president since the Resistance and, as a result, lent a measure of legitimacy to Pompidou’s government during the initial and uncertain months after de Gaulle’s resignation. Of course, Giscard never lacked political legitimacy. While he had won the presidency by a slim 400,000 votes, the RI leader was not succeeding the “charismatic” founder of Fifth Republic. Yet, like Pompidou, Giscard selected his prime minister based more on necessity than choice. Because he refused to dissolve the Gaullist-dominated Assembly, he needed to establish good relations with the UDR deputies lest his initiatives fail to receive their support. He had, therefore, little alternative but to appoint a UDR prime minister who had

⁵⁰ Quoted in Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 48.

experience working both with the Gaullists and with himself. As Pompidou needed Chaban, so Giscard needed Chirac.

Eventually, Giscard and Chirac would also find themselves in a position similar to that of Pompidou and Chaban. After the massive street demonstrations, seizure of schools, and worker sit-ins that occurred in May 1968, Pompidou recognized the need for reform but believed rapid social change harmful to France. He thus presented a cautious economic plan designed both to appease the working class and to prevent similar acts of civil unrest. Two months later, Prime Minister Chaban presented his New Society program. Also intended to avoid events similar to those of May 1968, Chaban's proposals went far beyond those of the president and centered on "redefining the state." Unwilling to support the far-reaching social reforms of the New Society, Pompidou spent much of his presidency attempting to undermine the man whom he needed to help legitimize his government. Giscard and Chirac were, of course, six years removed from the events of May 1968. Yet they would have to confront a situation that was just as unexpected and even more inexplicable: the economic distress of the mid-1970s. While in general agreement about economic policy, they differed on how best to prevent the social unrest that might result from high unemployment and soaring inflation. The disagreement led to Chirac's resignation in August 1976 and ultimately prompted Chirac and much of the Gaullist party to oppose Giscard in the years that followed.

Like many Western countries, France began to suffer from a general economic downturn in the early 1970s. Triggered by a range of events, including a string of poor harvests and the devaluation of the United States dollar after its abandonment of the gold standard in August 1971, France's economic woes first manifested themselves in the form of rising inflation. Food prices increased by nearly 20 percent during the last six months of 1973, and the average price

for all goods (measured by the Consumer Price Index, CPI) jumped 11.5 percent between December 1972 and October 1973.⁵¹ That same month, Arab members of OPEC announced a boycott of nations supporting Israel in its war with Egypt. The embargo immediately resulted in an oil shortfall, increased demand, and higher prices in affected countries like France. There, the price of crude oil rose by more than 50 percent – from roughly \$4.50 to \$7 per barrel – between October 1973 and February 1974.⁵² While nearly every industrialized nation felt the price crunch, several factors made France especially vulnerable to the energy crisis. First, France depended on oil for nearly two-thirds of its primary energy needs, and nearly half of its supply came from OPEC countries.⁵³ Second, because the franc was falling relative to the United States dollar – the only currency accepted by OPEC member nations – French consumers had to spend far more for far less oil.

France found itself at an impasse during the first months of 1974. That winter, workers began demanding higher wages in an effort to keep pace with rising prices. At the same time, French industries were also bearing the brunt of the embargo. With energy costs reducing their profit margins, the country's largest firms refused to increase wages and chose instead to lay off employees. By March 1974, almost 4 percent (or 500,000) of able-bodied men and women in France were unable find work.⁵⁴ While it could boast a lower unemployment rate than the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, France could not maintain a high a rate of productivity. The annual growth rate of the Gross National Product (GNP, the total valued of all goods and

⁵¹ See Charles F. Andrain, *Politics and Economic Policy in Western Democracies* (North Scituate, MA: Duxbury Press, 1980), 86.

⁵² See Robert J. Lieber, "Europe and America in the World Energy Crisis," *International Affairs* 4 (October 1979), 532.

⁵³ See Lieber, "Energy Policies of the Fifth Republic," 182.

⁵⁴ See Andrain, *Politics and Economic Policy in Western Democracies*, 86.

services produced in one year) dropped from 5.5 percent in January 1973 to 2.8 percent twelve months later.⁵⁵ As peculiar as it was perplexing, this combination of economic stagnation and soaring inflation had only recently been given a name: “stagflation.” Giscard’s new era had its first new word.

While the topic of the economy dominated cabinet meetings throughout June and most of July, few of Giscard’s ministers understood the nature or the depth of the problem. After all, concurrent economic stagnation and high inflation had only recently afflicted the Western world, and France had no more experience battling stagflation than any other industrialized country at the time. “We can hardly grasp the situation before us,” admitted one of Giscard’s aides, “let alone know how best to approach it we can only ask, ‘what can be done to cushion the shock?’”⁵⁶ The minister of finance, Jean-Paul Fourcade, was the first to answer. Following the lead of other European countries like West Germany, he suggested that the government reduce inflation by contracting the money supply. The proposal included an 18 percent surcharge on corporate taxes, a 10 percent increase on public service charges, and a higher income tax rate for individuals who earned 100,000 francs (about \$20,000) or more a year.⁵⁷ The Fourcade Plan went into effect in mid-June. Still, Giscard was far from satisfied. “[The Fourcade Plan] will do for now,” he confided to Poniatowski, “but who is to say we will not find ourselves in the same position in two years?”⁵⁸

Indeed, Giscard believed that deflationary measures alone would have few long-term benefits for France. As he told a staffer, “we must focus on today as much as we focus on

⁵⁵ See Balassa, “The French Economy Under the Fifth Republic,” 138.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Catherine Nay, *La Double méprise* (Paris: Grasset, 1980), 165.

⁵⁷ For details on the Fourcade Plan, see *Le Monde*, June 14, 1974.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Nay, *La Double méprise*, 172.

tomorrow There is little that can be done now to turn things around, [but] there is much we can do to ensure that France avoids a similar situation in the future.”⁵⁹ To safeguard France from high energy prices, Giscard first suggested that the government establish economic links with oil-producing nations other than those belonging to the OPEC cartel. He went as far as to visit to the Soviet Union in July 1974 in an effort to secure additional oil supplies.⁶⁰ However valuable, Soviet imports would do little to address what Giscard saw as the underlying problem of the energy crisis: France’s dependence on oil. He began, therefore, to explore alternative energy sources, and, in August 1974, he subsidized the construction of five nuclear power stations around France. At the same time, Giscard also started to funnel state funds to the aircraft, computer, and food industries in an effort to carve out what he termed a “new economic niche” for France. “To dominate the world market for ravioli may not inspire the crowds,” Giscard conceded during a meeting with ministers, “but . . . it is a more effective means of guaranteeing employment and growth in the future Things will turn around, but people must remain patient.”⁶¹

Yet national patience was wearing thin by the end of 1974. In December, the price of oil topped \$8.50 per barrel, and food prices remained 20 percent higher than they had been in October 1973.⁶² While the Fourcade Plan lowered inflation from 14 to 13 percent between June and December 1974, the contraction of the money supply had the inevitable effect of depressing consumer spending and increasing the unemployment rate. According to a report issued

⁵⁹ Quoted in Nay, *La Double méprise*, 174.

⁶⁰ For details, see Samy Cohen, *La Politique extérieure de Valéry Giscard d’Estaing* (Paris: Presses de la foundation nationale des sciences politiques, 1985), 152-53.

⁶¹ Quoted in Nay, *La Double méprise*, 184.

⁶² See Andrain, *Politics and Economic Policy in Western Democracies*, 88.

December 10, 1974, the number of French men and women unable to find work increased from 400,000 to 650,000 during the last half of the year.⁶³ The release of the new numbers on unemployment coincided with a rash of street demonstrations in and around Paris. Leftist deputies responded by demanding that Giscard dissolve the National Assembly. “The president has done nothing to improve the lot of the French worker,” claimed the Communist Marchais. “Hundreds of thousands find themselves without a job and without income Unless new [legislative] elections are called for and new policies are devised, I anticipate violence in the streets.”⁶⁴ A journalist writing for the left-leaning *L’Express* voiced a similar concern. “For now, most [Parisians] live comfortably . . . [but] people are getting anxious I dare say that the government will soon be faced with trouble unless changes are made.”⁶⁵

As tensions mounted that winter, Chirac grew increasingly nervous and soon became convinced that the government should settle on a new tack. “The prime minister,” an aide observed during the first week of December, “seems to think that France is near the breaking point . . . he does nothing but talk about getting people off the streets and into jobs.”⁶⁶ Indeed, as Pompidou’s former protégé, Chirac naturally believed that social peace was a function of economic prosperity. He concluded, therefore, that the most effective way to stem potential unrest was to reduce the unemployment rate. While the prime minister had no means to create jobs immediately, he did pressure Giscard to abandon the anti-inflationary policies of the Fourcade Plan. “With 600,000 unemployed,” he told the president, “we have reached a point where the country is about to blow-up The ‘recovery’ plan has lasted long enough. We

⁶³ See Andrain, *Politics and Economic Policy in Western Democracies*, 92.

⁶⁴ Quoted in *Le Monde*, December 15, 1974.

⁶⁵ *L’Express*, November 26, 1974.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Jean Bothorel, *Le Pharaon: Histoire du septennat giscardien* (Paris: Grasset, 1983), 141.

need a new reflationary package.”⁶⁷ Of course, the plan would increase the amount of currency in circulation and almost certainly raise inflation. And like any economic initiative, many months would pass before people reaped the potential benefits. Until then, the prime minister proposed that the state pay unemployed workers 90 percent of their former wages for up to one year.⁶⁸ “Strong social policies,” Chirac said confidently, “will ensure the calm.”⁶⁹

Giscard agreed with Chirac’s new strategy, at least in part. After all, the contraction of the money supply six months earlier had reduced inflation only slightly, and the president was eager to provide additional state funds to the niche industries of the future. Yet Giscard thought the prime minister’s “strong social policies” not strong enough. He agreed that government payments to the unemployed would have an immediate impact, but he also believed that more drastic social reforms could ease mounting social tensions as well as appease the political left. “[The left] has been eager for a fight since the [presidential] election,” he told Poniatoski. “And the recent [unemployment] numbers have supplied them with more firepower I will not, as they demand, dissolve the Assembly and call for new [legislative] elections . . . but perhaps it is time we offer them something else.” When Poniatoski inquired what “something else” might entail, the president smiled and offered a typically clever response: “We will give [the left] some crumbs and they will think it the whole cake.”⁷⁰

Giscard explained what these “crumbs” were the following day during a meeting with several ministers, including Chirac. “The last six months,” the president admitted, “have seemed

⁶⁷ Quoted in Nay, *La Double méprise*, 172.

⁶⁸ For details on Chirac’s proposals, see Vincent Wright, *Continuity and Change* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1984,) 132.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Nay, *La Double méprise*, 153.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Nay, *La Double méprise*, 186.

less like a ‘new era’ than a ‘not so new era’ the economy has yet to improve, and it will probably not [improve] for some time.” “In the meantime,” he said, “we will have to make some adjustments.”⁷¹ Giscard confirmed that he would launch a modest reflationary package worth approximately 15 million francs (about \$3 million). He also said that he would back Chirac’s proposal to provide “workers made redundant on economic grounds” 90 percent of their former wage for one year.⁷² After a pausing briefly, the president then declared that he would sponsor several bills designed to “pacify” the left.⁷³ The reforms themselves were inspired by Mitterrand’s Common Program and included lowering the voting age, legalizing abortion, and relaxing the laws on divorce. Before concluding the meeting, he clarified his reasons for supporting such progressive social legislation. “We are faced with a difficult situation,” he told them, “but I believe there is an answer.” Giscard explained that reforms “directed at society” would serve both to “pacify the leftists in the streets” as well broaden the government’s base of support in the Assembly. “When the time comes to make *real* reforms,” he concluded, “we will be able to remind the left of our generosity.”⁷⁴

Chirac listened with growing fury. Like his former mentor, Pompidou, he believed that drastic social reform was both foolish and potentially harmful. Moreover, he had assisted Giscard – not Chaban – during the presidential election because he believed the RI leader had a better chance to defeat Mitterrand on the second ballot. The prime minister could not help but feel betrayed. Before him stood a man who had cast himself as a bulwark against socialism in an effort to win Gaullist votes and the election seven months earlier. Now, Giscard planned to enact

⁷¹ Quoted in Nay, *La Double méprise*, 192.

⁷² This phrase was defined legally in January 1975. For details, see Wright, *Continuity and Change*, 132.

⁷³ Quoted in Nay, *La Double méprise*, 194.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Nay, *La Double méprise*, 195. Emphasis added.

the policies of the man against whom they had so vigorously campaigned. After the president declared that he would ask deputies to lower the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen before the end of the month, Chirac could no longer hide his displeasure. He rose from his chair, walked to the door, and then addressed the president: “I have given you France on a plate,” he claimed smugly, referring to his efforts to help Giscard during the 1974 presidential election, “and now you are prepared to feed it to the Communists.”⁷⁵ With that terse and biting remark, Chirac left the Elysée.

The prime minister found himself increasingly isolated in the weeks and then the months that followed. Giscard began inviting ministers to closed-doors meetings without informing Chirac. These *conseils restreints* (restricted meetings) often lasted for more than an hour and, according to one of Giscard’s advisors, typically focused on topics previously discussed at the Matignon.⁷⁶ When the president did need to communicate with the Chirac, he did so through typed notes that would be delivered by staffers.⁷⁷ And increasingly, Giscard allowed his top aides to assume duties normally reserved for the prime minister. Poniatoski took charge of the Delegation of Territorial Improvement and Regional Planning (DATAR), while Fourcade was given the responsibility of arbitrating budget disputes between the various ministries. By the end of December, said one observer, “day to day relations between the two halves of the executive were perhaps less trusting than they had been under Pompidou and Chaban.”⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Quoted in Nay, *La Double méprise*, 196.

⁷⁶ See Ezra Suleiman, *Presidents and Prime Ministers* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1980), 115.

⁷⁷ Suleiman, *Presidents and Prime Ministers*, 116.

⁷⁸ Knapp, *Gaullism without de Gaulle*, 342.

Meanwhile, Chirac attempted to regain the initiative by using the Matignon's vast system of patronage. He reminded UDR deputies that as prime minister he had exclusive access to approximately 100 million francs (about \$20 million) of the annual budget and could distribute those funds when and where he saw fit.⁷⁹ He also appointed members of the UDR central committee to high-profile positions at the Matignon. They returned the favor by electing Chirac secretary-general of the Gaullist party.⁸⁰ Chirac also invoked his high government post in an effort to slander Giscard and his policies. "As the prime minister," he told a group of Gaullist deputies on December 26, "I must say that I do not agree with the [social reforms] . . . soon to be put forth by the president There is no point in having a non-leftist government that proposes leftist measures I urge all of you to oppose Giscard."⁸¹

While most Gaullist deputies followed Chirac's instructions, they found they could do nothing to stop the president's progressive social agenda. On December 28, 1974, 165 of the 183 UDR deputies in the National Assembly opposed a bill lowering the voting age to eighteen for both males and females. Socialist, Communist, and RI deputies overwhelmingly supported the proposal and thus repealed the provision in the 1958 constitution fixing the minimum voting age at twenty-one for males as well as the 1944 decree setting the same age requirement for females. A similar scenario played out seven months later when the government sponsored a proposal legalizing abortion. All but ten UDR deputies voted against the proposition. Yet, again, the left joined ranks and the bill passed by a 284 to 189 margin. Named for Giscard's minister of health, Simone Veil, the "Veil law" rescinded the 1920 decree banning abortion and

⁷⁹ Quoted in Nay, *La Double méprise*, 159.

⁸⁰ For details, see Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 46. This move would later prove significant.

⁸¹ Quoted in Szafran, *Chirac*, 96.

allowed women to terminate an unwanted pregnancy up to the tenth week.⁸² And in August 1976, Socialist, Communist, and centrist deputies enacted a new divorce law despite stiff opposition from Gaullists. By a vote of 271 to 201, the National Assembly annulled those portions of an 1884 provision barring divorce by mutual consent or on the grounds of incompatibility. For the first time in the country's history, French couples wanting to end their marriage could file for a "no fault" divorce.⁸³

Ten days after the passage of the Divorce Act, Chirac resigned as prime minister. Publicly, he muted his antagonism, using the issue of policy as his motive for leaving office. "It is the chief of state who is directly responsible for the general direction of policy," he told reporters during an August 26 press conference. "It is he who must give the instructions for the daily work of the government. This implies that there cannot be any discussions over the directions he gives. Therefore, the prime minister, by definition, must agree with the initiatives of the president of the Republic or resign Today, I am resigning."⁸⁴ Privately, though, Chirac admitted that his reason for leaving the Matignon was more personal. "Giscard can no longer be trusted," he warned friend and fellow Gaullist Charles Pasqua. "I see little difference

⁸² Abortion had been prohibited by law since the institution of Napoleon Bonaparte's Civil Code in 1804. The 1920 law not only confirmed this decree but also made it illegal for anyone to recommend abortion, sell instruments to induce an abortion, sell or distribute contraceptives, or even recommend birth control. For details on the 1804 and 1920 laws, see Jean Elisabeth Pedersen, *Legislating the French Family: Feminism, Theater, and Republican Politics, 1870-1920* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 163-66.

⁸³ Divorce was first legalized in France in 1792, modified and restricted by Napoleon Bonaparte's Civil Code, and abolished by the restored monarchy in May 1816. During the early years of the Third Republic, Senator Alfred Naquet pushed for and secured the reinstatement of divorce. While the 1884 bill allowed French couples to separate legally, it barred divorce by mutual consent or on the grounds of incompatibility. Divorce was permitted only on three grounds: "ill-treatment" or spousal abuse, criminal conviction, and adultery. For details, see Pedersen, *Legislating the French Family*, 13-37.

⁸⁴ Quoted in *Le Monde*, August 26, 1974.

between him and someone like Mitterrand or Marchais As [de Gaulle's] successors, we must to do whatever is necessary to stop Giscard and retake France.”⁸⁵

Chirac's Challenge: The RPR and the 1981 Presidential Election

Chirac's resignation in August 1976 was the first of many changes for the Giscard government. The president immediately appointed friend and RI member Raymond Barre prime minister. He also reduced the number of officials in his personal staff, removing all but three of his ten closest advisors. Giscard even started issuing ministers precise memoranda detailing their weekly objectives.⁸⁶ Yet the most profound change to occur after Chirac left the Matignon had little to do with the composition, size, or freedom of the president's staff. Remarkably, August 1976 also marks the point at which Giscard passed his last significant reforms as president. To be sure, the government did enact what one observer has called “*reformattes*” or lesser reforms between the years 1976 and 1981.⁸⁷ Yet Giscard proved incapable of passing initiatives as noteworthy as those enacted prior to Chirac's resignation. Upon losing the presidency to Mitterrand in May 1981, most of the campaign pledges made by Giscard seven years earlier had gone unfilled. The government continued to administer many of the country's largest industries like steel, coal, and electricity. The state also retained control of the education system, determining enrollment quotas and curriculum requirements for schools and universities. And the minister of information still supplied content to ORTF newscasters.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Szafran, *Chirac*, 152.

⁸⁶ For more on the changes Giscard made following Chirac's resignation, see Frears, *France in the Giscard Presidency*, 31-48.

⁸⁷ Some of these “*reformattes*” included reducing the age (from 65 to 60) at which a person could receive their retirement pension and abolishing price ceilings on consumer goods like bread. For details, see Thody, *The Fifth French Republic*, 77-79 and Alain Duhamel, *La République giscardienne* (Paris: Grasset, 1980), 190-97.

Most scholars explain Giscard's failure to secure large-scale reform by looking to the president himself. "[Giscard's] presidency," argues political scientist Vincent Wright, "after an early reformist phase, became increasingly characterized by its cautious, purely reactive nature The presidency [that] commenced with the promise of so much . . . ended in an aura of prosaic and prudent conservatism."⁸⁸ Ian Derbyshire echoes this assertion, claiming that the lack of reform between 1976 and 1981 was attributable to Giscard's aristocratic origins. "The later and conservative Giscard," he contends, "was merely the true Giscard – the scion of the upper class elites who could talk change but was unwilling to see it through."⁸⁹ Still, others like Thomas Ferenczi insist that the economic difficulties that plagued much of Giscard's *septennat* (seven-year term) caused the president to become increasingly frustrated and less inclined to embrace reform. According to him, "the deteriorating world situation due to the impact of energy crisis . . . proved to [Giscard] that France needed security not change, reassurance and not reformism, prudence and not adventure."⁹⁰

Indeed, during his final five years as president, Giscard rarely acted like the liberal-minded reformer who had promised a more "open and tolerant" society in 1974. The president insisted that he be seated and served first when hosting dignitaries at the Elysée Palace. He demanded that everyone outside his family use the formal *vous* as opposed to the more familiar *tu* when addressing him. Giscard organized large hunting expeditions deep into the grasslands of western Africa, where he had fresh fruit, water, and linens flown in daily by helicopter. At the same time, the president began to staff his government almost exclusively with graduates of his

⁸⁸ Wright, *Change in Continuity*, 14.

⁸⁹ Ian Derbyshire, *Politics in France: From Giscard to Mitterrand* (London: Sandpiper, 1987), 49.

⁹⁰ Thomas Ferenczi, *Le Prince au miroir: essai sur l'ordre giscardien* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1981), 16.

prestigious alma mater, the *Ecole nationale d'administration* (ENA). According to one study, more “enarchs” or ENA alumni worked for the state between 1976 and 1981 than did at any other time during the Fifth Republic.⁹¹ Even some of the initiatives put forth by Giscard during his final five years in office suggested that the president was less an enlightened reformer than an apprehensive conservative. In January 1977, for instance, he sponsored a bill allowing law enforcement agents to stop and search any vehicle on a public road. The following year, his government proposed legislation permitting officials to detain or expel foreigners believed to be a “threat to public order.” And in 1980, he enacted the “Security and Liberty Law,” which lengthened prison sentences for first-time offenders and lessened the possibility of parole for anyone convicted of a violent crime.⁹²

Without question, Giscard’s personal attitude greatly influenced the last five years of his presidency, but it does not wholly account for the fact that major tenets of his Advanced Liberal Society program were never enacted. On more than one occasion, Giscard attempted to rollback the French state only to be blocked by uncooperative forces in the National Assembly. In January 1977, for example, the Assembly voted against legislation ending state control the ORTF. The president’s efforts to assist private business were dashed the following May. That month, deputies refused to support a government-sponsored bill that would have eliminated price ceilings and allowed firms the opportunity to earn greater profits. In March 1978, deputies voted down a proposal granting more autonomy to French schools and universities.⁹³ Thus a more accurate explanation of why the president failed in his reform agenda focuses less on Giscard’s

⁹¹ Pierre Birnbaum, *The Heights of Power: An Essay on the Power Elite in France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 121.

⁹² For details on Giscard’s law and order policies, see Jacques Chevallier, *Discours et idéologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1980), 80-86.

⁹³ These reforms will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

personality than on the stiff political opposition he encountered during his last five years in office.

Much of the resistance Giscard faced came from the Socialist and Communist parties. To be sure, the president's efforts to broaden his political base by supporting progressive social legislation had lured several notable leftist into the centrist fold. Former Socialists like Françoise Giroud, Eric Hinterman, and Max Lejeune joined Giscard's staff between January 1975 and August 1976. Yet such conversions were rare and could not hide the fact that the great bulk of PS and PCF deputies opposed the president's efforts to reign in the French state. Of course, the refusal of leftists to support Giscard's reforms stemmed partially from reasons of ideology. The Socialist and Communist parties had long strived to enhance, not limit, the government's authority, especially in areas such as the economy. The left also resisted the president for more practical reasons. The results of the March 1973 legislative elections as well as the presidential election of May 1974 had clearly demonstrated the benefits of left-wing solidarity. With new legislative elections scheduled for March 1978, PS and PCF officials were all too eager to maintain friendly relations, remain dedicated the Common Program, and appear unified in their opposition of the government.

The UDR, on the other hand, found itself in circumstances all together different than did the left in August 1976. Unlike the PS and PCF, the Gaullist party had suffered a significant decline during the March 1973 legislative elections, losing 113 seats in the Assembly. While Gaullists continued to hold a slight edge over their Socialist and Communist rivals, they could no longer claim majority control and thus could no longer dictate government policy. The Gaullists reached the second stage of their separation from power when Giscard won the presidency in May 1974. Two years later, Chirac felt obliged to surrender the last UDR stronghold, the

premiership, after disagreeing with the president's progressive social agenda. The party that had for so long dominated French politics was clearly not so dominate by the time Chirac resigned as prime minister in August 1976. As one scholar put it, "the Gaullist party no longer had a clear role in administering France The party had always been the authority. By August 1976, this was obviously not the case."⁹⁴

Also unlike the parties of the left, the UDR had yet to make clear its attitude toward reform. While the PS and PCF had been dedicated to the Common Program in recent years, the Gaullists had shown themselves to be deeply ambivalent regarding the issue of political change since 1969. Pompidou, for instance, spent much of his presidency undermining the social and economic proposals made by Chaban in September 1969. Pompidou then sacked Chaban in July 1972 only to support the progressive reforms featured in the Provins Program six months later. And two years after the UDR declared itself "the party of change" during their November 1973 conference in Nantes, Gaullist deputies opposed measures legalizing abortion, lowering the voting age to eighteen, and relaxing the requirements for divorce. One UDR deputy best described the UDR's ambivalence toward reform by comparing his party to the PCF. "We need to be more like the Communists – you cannot talk to a Communist without hearing *the* Communist stance on the issue of reform. That's *good*; that's what *we* should have."⁹⁵

By 1976, the UDR could not even claim the distinction of being a cross-class *rassemblement* (rally) as it had in years past. Prior to Pompidou's winning the presidency in June 1969, Gaullist officials could tout themselves as representing the "metro at rush-hour . . .

⁹⁴ Kay Lawson, "The Impact of Party Reform in Party Systems: The Case of the RPR in France," *Comparative Politics* 4 (July 1981), 403.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Lawson, "The Impact of Party Reform in Party Systems," 405.

neither right nor left, but the whole country” – and with good reason.⁹⁶ The party’s electorate was as large as it was diverse. It attracted members of the working class at the same time that it appealed to the wealthy. Gaullist candidates received as many votes from the young as they did the old. Just as men supported the party as did women. By the mid-1970s, however, the same could not be said. Males voted in higher numbers for the UDR than did females. People above the age of forty were twice as likely to support the party as were people under the age of twenty five. Increasingly, farmers, civil servants, and white-collar workers joined the party in greater numbers than did artisans and unskilled laborers. The party’s electorate had both shrunk and become more conservative by 1976.⁹⁷

Thus, Chirac resigned the premiership in August 1976 to find himself atop what one observer has called a party suffering from “a veritable crisis of identity.”⁹⁸ The UDR could no longer claim to be France’s most dominant party. It could no longer cast itself as the “party of change.” And it could no longer attract a broad cross-section of the French electorate. The Gaullist party needed to redefine itself to remain a viable political alternative, and Chirac knew it. “We,” he said, referring to fellow party members, “must rediscover our Gaullist inspiration we must use what we have at our disposal nothing is more valuable than the legacy of our leaders, de Gaulle and Pompidou.”⁹⁹ During a meeting with several UDR deputies in early September 1976, Chirac, the party’s secretary-general, made a bold proposition: “We are not and never have been a party of reformers The social democratic legislation that is currently

⁹⁶ Quoted in Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 162.

⁹⁷ For details on the Gaullist electorate prior to 1976, see Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 138-52.

⁹⁸ Dorothy Pickles, *Problems of Contemporary French Politics* (London: Methuen, 1981), 50.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Lawson, “The Impact of Party Reform in Party Systems,” 405.

being enacted,” he said, alluding to Giscard’s social reforms, “has never been part of our larger objective If we want to regain power, we must return to our Gaullist roots.”¹⁰⁰

Chirac’s desire to return to a more orthodox brand of Gaullism was largely accepted by fellow party members. During a visit to Rocamadour, a city in the Gaullist-friendly region of south-central France, UDR voters greeted the secretary-general with much fanfare and applauded his call for a “new” *rassemblement* that would be responsive to the needs of “real” Gaullists.¹⁰¹ Party members in the northeastern part of France also responded positively to Chirac. In Lille, constituents welcomed the secretary-general and praised his speech entitled, “Defending the Prerogatives of the French State.”¹⁰² When he delivered the same speech to a crowd in Amiens several days later, Gaullists even responded with the chant, “Chirac for President!”¹⁰³ In late November, members of the UDR’s central committee agreed unanimously to amend the party’s statutes to reflect this more orthodox posturing.¹⁰⁴ Then, on December 5, 1976, before an estimated crowd of 60,000 in Paris, Chirac renamed the UDR the *Rassemblement pour la République* (Rally for the Republic, RPR).

The party’s new commitment to what Chirac called “the Gaullist vision of the state” was revealed in January 1977.¹⁰⁵ That month, the president proposed a bill ending government control of the ORTF. The plan called for a new broadcasting structure made up of seven independent companies, each of which was to have its own specialized duty. The French Society

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Szafran, *Chirac*, 289.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in *Le Monde*, October 4, 1976.

¹⁰² For details, see *Le Monde*, October 22, 1976.

¹⁰³ Quoted in *Le Monde*, October 26, 1976.

¹⁰⁴ For details, see Lawson, “The Impact of Party Reform in Party Systems,” 405-12.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Szafran, *Chirac*, 256.

of Production (SFP), for instance, would assume all directing and production tasks. The National Audiovisual Institute would be responsible for all issues involving research. And three companies (TF1, Antenne 2, and FR3) would oversee television and radio.¹⁰⁶ Chirac, along with fellow RPR deputies, immediately criticized the proposal, claiming the initiative “infringed on the state’s right to disseminate information.”¹⁰⁷ Chirac also insisted, as had de Gaulle, that the ORTF served as the “voice of France” and should, therefore, not be “tampered with.”¹⁰⁸ The following day, 175 of the 183 RPR deputies in the National Assembly voted against the bill. Joining the Gaullists in opposition were eighty-one Socialists, sixty-nine Communists, and twelve members of the RI. Giscard’s attempt to decentralize the ORTF failed.¹⁰⁹

Four months later, the RPR opposed another government-sponsored initiative eliminating price controls on goods typically sold by private business. Meant to allow greater profits for privately owned companies, the Monroy bill proposed that the government no longer set artificial price restrictions on items such as petroleum and gasoline.¹¹⁰ Chirac condemned the proposal, saying that the state could not “abandon” consumers while energy prices remained high.¹¹¹ His fellow Gaullists clearly agreed. Of the 183 RPR deputies in the Assembly, all but two opposed the legislation. Along with help from eighty-five Socialists, all seventy-three Communists, and

¹⁰⁶ For more information on this bill, see Wright, *Continuity and Change*, 180.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in *Le Monde*, January, 11, 1977.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in *Le Monde*, January 11, 1977.

¹⁰⁹ For details on the vote in the National Assembly, see *Le Monde*, January 13, 1977.

¹¹⁰ The Monroy bill was named for the minister of the economy, René Monroy. For details, see Lieber, “Energy Policies of the Fifth French Republic,” 186-89.

¹¹¹ Quoted in *Le Monde*, May 5, 1977.

thirty-four RI deputies, Gaullist deputies defeated the Monroy bill on the afternoon of May 18, 1977.¹¹²

The RPR also led the attack against government efforts to loosen the state's hold over the French education system. In March 1978, the Elysée proposed legislation granting French schools and universities more leeway when determining enrollment figures and course material. The bill also included several minor clauses ending the practice whereby students deemed capable of benefiting from an academic education were separated from those children who were not.¹¹³ Chirac likened the latter stipulation to "social leveling" and called the initiative as whole a "mistake."¹¹⁴ "Self-determination," he told RPR deputies during a March 12 meeting, "cannot be reconciled with education The state has a responsibility to ensure that French students receive the proper training."¹¹⁵ Gaullist deputies responded by voting unanimously against the initiative. As had occurred several months earlier, the left joined them in opposition, and the bill failed.¹¹⁶

As had occurred in previous years, the refusal of the Gaullist party to endorse such broad, liberalizing reforms coincided with a loss of moderate support. In fact, according to a survey conducted the week prior to the May 1978 legislative elections, a majority of voters who identified themselves as "former Gaullists" cited the RPR's "resistance to change" as their reason for abandoning the party.¹¹⁷ Exactly how much support the RPR had lost became evident

¹¹² For details on the vote in the Assembly, see *Le Monde*, May 19, 1977.

¹¹³ For details on this proposal, see Thody, *The Fifth French Republic*, 85-86.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Szafran, *Chirac*, 289.

¹¹⁵ Quoted in Szafran, *Chirac*, 289.

¹¹⁶ For details on the vote in the Assembly, see *Le Monde*, March 15, 1978.

only after results of the legislative elections were announced on May 14. Gaullist candidates received less than 20 percent of the vote, and the party held on to only 150 of its 183 seats in the National Assembly. For its part, the RI surpassed the totals of the RPR, receiving nearly 22 percent of the ballots cast and winning an additional thirty-two seats. The president's party now had eighty-nine deputies in the Assembly. The Socialist and Communist parties made the largest gains. As they had in March 1973, the two groups fought together under the UGSD label. The coalition won approximately 50 percent of the vote, and the Socialist and Communist parties came away with an additional thirty-four seats, giving them 200 in all.¹¹⁸ While the outcome may not have been as injurious to the Gaullist party as the "car accident" legislative elections of March 1973, the RPR had certainly been hurt. For the first time in the history of the Fifth Republic, Gaullist deputies controlled fewer seats than their leftist rivals.

Yet the Gaullist party's refusal to embrace reform did more than just diminish its numbers in the National Assembly. By blocking the president's efforts to decentralize the ORTF, assist private business, and limit the state's influence over education, the RPR also hurt the president himself. According to an opinion poll conducted two weeks after the May 1978 legislative elections, 20 percent of the people surveyed looked "less favorably" upon Giscard than they did four years earlier. Of this 20 percent, nearly half agreed that the "absence of large-scale reform" had contributed most to their lower opinion of the president.¹¹⁹ The same survey produced similar results when conducted in June 1979. That month, 17 percent of French men and women questioned claimed that Giscard's failure to enact "sweeping reforms" caused them

¹¹⁷ See *Le Monde*, March 7, 1978.

¹¹⁸ See *Le Monde*, March 14, 1978, for elections results.

¹¹⁹ See *Le Monde*, May 30, 1978.

to look less favorably upon the president.¹²⁰ This number was even higher a year-and-a-half later. When asked to describe their opinion of the president in January 1981 as compared to May 1974, nearly 50 percent said they liked the president “less” or “much less” than they did four years earlier. Nearly half of the people surveyed based their lower estimation of Giscard on the belief he had yet to advance “large-scale change” in France.¹²¹ Put another way, the Gaullists were sinking, and they were taking the president with them.

Certainly, Giscard had done little to buoy public perception of himself during his final years in office. In May 1980, for instance, he made an official state visit to the Soviet Union, where he participated in an elaborate wreath-laying ceremony at the tomb of Vladimir Lenin. When he returned home a week later, the right as well as the left bombarded him with criticism. Even the Socialist Mitterrand felt obliged to condemn the president, referring to him as “Moscow’s little helper.”¹²² Later that year, Giscard suffered even greater embarrassment when *La Canard Enchaîné* published photocopies of documents alleging that he had accepted several diamonds from Jean Bedel Bokassa, the dictator of the Central African Republic, in 1973. Although the president neither confirmed nor denied the accusation, the scandal, as one commentator put it, “certainly did nothing to help his chances for reelection.”¹²³ And, like all other Western leaders, Giscard was unable to solve the dire economic problems that had gripped his country for almost a decade. Inflation continued to top 13 percent.¹²⁴ The number of men and women in France unable to find work had risen from 400,000 to 1.7 million between May

¹²⁰ See *Le Monde*, June 30, 1970.

¹²¹ See *Le Monde*, January 30, 1981.

¹²² Quoted in Thody, *The Fifth French Republic*, 86.

¹²³ Thody, *The Fifth French Republic*, 88.

¹²⁴ See Wright, *Continuity and Change*, 22.

1974 and May 1981.¹²⁵ A second petroleum shortfall, precipitated in part by political upheaval in Iran, drove consumer demand and prices even higher. In France, the price of crude oil rose by 65 percent – from roughly \$12.70 to \$21 per barrel – between December 1978 and July 1979.¹²⁶

Even so, it was Giscard's failure to secure large-scale reform that dogged him most in the months prior to the May 1981 presidential election. For example, journalist Noël-Jean Bergeroux claimed in May 1980 that Giscard had "failed his test as president." "On May 27, 1974," Bergeroux continued, "Valéry Giscard d'Estaing told France a 'new era' had begun in French politics Six years later, and we have only heard rumors and felt the squeeze of a bad economy Where, I ask, is this 'new era' you have promised us, Mr. President?"¹²⁷ "[Giscard's] presidency," declared another reporter, "has thus far represented the triumph of incantation over action After an initial flurry of reforms . . . the president has yet to transform French society."¹²⁸ Jean-François Deniau echoed that sentiment in the March 13, 1981 edition of *Le Monde*: "The France of today has changed little from the France of ten years ago M. Giscard d'Estaing must, in part, be held accountable for this."¹²⁹

The candidates who opposed Giscard during the 1981 presidential election were of a similar opinion. True, most focused on the president's failure to reduce unemployment and inflation, but his challengers were just as quick to remind voters that Giscard had done little to change French society. For instance, Michel Crépeau, a member of the Radical party, argued

¹²⁵ See Wright, *Continuity and Change*, 21.

¹²⁶ See Lieber, "Europe and America in the World Energy Crisis," 531.

¹²⁷ *Le Monde*, May 20, 1980.

¹²⁸ *Le Monde*, December 12, 1980.

¹²⁹ *Le Monde*, March 13, 1981.

that the man who had promised “change without risk,” now represented “risk without change.”¹³⁰ Chirac entered the race in mid-March claiming falsely that it was not he but the president who had lacked the “spirit for reform.”¹³¹ Mitterrand began his campaign a few days later by saying that the president “had made many promises, few of which have come to fruition in the last seven years.”¹³² While the Mitterrand admitted that he and his party helped the RPR block Giscard’s proposals, he insisted that the country required “a man capable of keeping his word If one promises change,” he went on, “then one should deliver change I promise France that . . . I will be able to deliver social, political, and economic change.”¹³³

Mitterrand rode the cry, “We need change!” all the way to a first-ballot lead on April 26. He received a little less than 26 percent or 7.5 million of the votes cast. For his part, Giscard managed to finish just behind him with 24 percent or 6.9 million of the ballots cast. However impressive, the president’s position was far from comfortable. While he trailed Mitterrand by a slim 2 percentage points, he had won 1.4 million more votes on the first ballot seven years earlier. In some regions like the Ile de France, Brittany, Lower Normandy, and Auvergne the president lost about 10 percent of the vote he had received in May 1974. Still, Mitterrand was the lone candidate to receive more support than Giscard. Chirac, Crépeau, and the other six candidates who had placed their names on the April 26 ballot failed to move on to the run-off election scheduled for May 10.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Quoted in *Le Monde*, March 6, 1981.

¹³¹ Quoted in *Le Monde*, March 14, 1981.

¹³² Quoted in *Le Monde*, March 17, 1981.

¹³³ Quoted in *Le Monde*, March 17, 1981.

¹³⁴ For details on the results of the April 26 election, see *Le Monde*, April 27, 1981.

While the president managed to cut into Mitterrand's thin lead, he was unable to overtake his challenger on the second ballot. All told, 15.7 million, or a little less than 51 percent of French men and women, voted for Mitterrand. Giscard received 14.8 million or about 49 percent of the ballots cast. Indeed, the results looked eerily similar to those of the May 1974 presidential election, as a slim 1.5 percent separated the two candidates. This time, of course, Mitterrand found the results far more agreeable than did Giscard. When pressed to explain his narrow defeat, the president offered a surprisingly frank response. Of course, he admitted, the country's flagging economy certainly hurt his chances, and he also supposed the "Bokassa diamonds affair" had "some impact" on the outcome the election.¹³⁵ The president also laid much of the blame for his defeat at the feet of the Gaullist party. Giscard claimed that Chirac and the RPR had engaged in "premeditated betrayal" when they opposed his reforms in years past.¹³⁶ "[The election] might have turned out different," the president lamented, "if [the Gaullists] had supported me and my proposals."¹³⁷

Although probably an exaggeration, the statement seems to confirm – at least in Giscard's mind – that the refusal of the Gaullist party to support reform ultimately contributed to his defeat. That Chirac or anyone in the RPR could have had the foresight to sabotage Giscard's reelection bid by opposing his reforms is, of course, highly improbable. Yet politics are as much about policy as they are personality, and French politics in the 1970s were no different. Just as Pompidou felt personally insulted when Chaban unveiled the New Society, so too did Chirac when Giscard began to enact progressive social legislation in December 1974. Chirac's admitted

¹³⁵ Quoted in *Le Monde*, May 12, 1981.

¹³⁶ Quoted in *Le Monde*, May 12, 1981.

¹³⁷ Quoted in *Le Monde*, May 12, 1981.

goal was not so much to stop the president's reforms as it was to "stop Giscard" himself. The Gaullist party's more orthodox posturing after August 1976 may not have been part of larger plan to betray Giscard five years later, but the implications of its shift in ideology must be understood as contributing to the outcome of the 1981 presidential election. The actions of the RPR clearly contributed to the fact that Giscard failed to secure far-reaching change during his final years in office and thus denied the president a valuable weapon in his fight against Mitterrand: a strong reformist record. In this way, the Gaullist party's refusal to embrace social, political, and economic change did more than just erode their own base of support, but it also eroded the support base of the man who stood the best chance of preventing a Socialist from assuming control of the Fifth Republic.

Conclusion

In the preface of his study *La Société bloquée*, French sociologist Michel Crozier described his country as “stalled.” “Although France is a changing society,” he admitted, “it is severely restricted by its straitjacket of centralized administration, its caste system impervious to any form of communication, and its rigid style of education and models of thinking that are completely hostile to any form of experiment. The less French society changes, the more . . . it suffocates. We should not assume that the French are unwilling to change. On the contrary, they are feverishly active in this regard. But their ideologies are compensating, not motive, forces, and their violent criticisms and recriminations, which they express in very concrete terms, merely serve to strengthen their traditional modes of administration, communication, and reasoning.”¹ “France,” he concluded, “is in dire need of change . . . Without reform, it will remain “stalled” . . . Our country will be no different than it was a decade ago.”²

Remarkably, Crozier’s words, written in 1970, remained relevant when Mitterrand won the presidency in 1981. To be sure, these eleven years witnessed many efforts to alter the political status quo. From Chaban’s New Society to Giscard’s Advanced Liberal Society, France, as Crozier suggested, never shied away from the topic of political change. Even so, reform-minded leaders were unable to jump-start the “stalled” society that plagued France during the 1970s. By the end of the decade, the state’s hold over the economy was as firm as it had been ten years earlier. The Elysée continued to set high tariff rates, retained control of the country’s largest industries, and still regulated prices on many consumer goods. State officials also continued to administer the education system, determining everything from enrollment

¹ Michel Crozier, *La Société bloquée* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), v.

² Crozier, *La Société bloquée*, 174.

quotas to curriculum requirements for schools and universities. The county's minister of information still supplied and monitored all news content broadcast by the ORTF. Indeed, probably few French men and women were surprised to open the March 13, 1981 edition of *Le Monde* and read that their country had "changed little" during the previous ten years.³

To assume that France emerged from the 1970s completely unchanged, however, would be both careless and wrong. The evolution of the Republic between 1970 and 1980 illustrates this point. Born of a military *coup d'état* in May 1958, the Fifth French Republic and its constitution were created by and tailored to fit a single man, de Gaulle. However much prosperity France enjoyed during de Gaulle's eleven years as president, the legitimacy of the Republic remained in doubt upon his resignation in April 1969. Mitterrand, for instance, suggested that the Fifth Republic had no more chance for survival than did the empire of Napoleon Bonaparte after the great powers of Europe exiled the diminutive ruler to the remote island of Elba in 1814.⁴ Even Pompidou believed himself the inheritor of a "bastard regime" after his election as president in June 1969.⁵ A decade later, French leaders would have been foolish, however, to characterize the Republic in this fashion. From the death of a president and scandals involving top government officials to a deep economic recession and the weakening of the country's top party, the years between 1970 and 1980 were what historian Philip Thody has called a "trial by fire" for the Fifth Republic.⁶ Certainly, France did not emerge from the decade without sustaining some serious burns. Soaring inflation and high unemployment were, after all, enough to put an end to the economic success the country had enjoyed during the previous thirty

³ Quoted in *Le Monde*, March 13, 1981.

⁴ See Thody, *The Fifth French Republic*, 61.

⁵ Pompidou, *Le Noeud gordien*, 66.

⁶ Thody, *The Fifth French Republic*, 145.

years. Yet, France did emerge, and it did so with the Republic intact. The greatest testament to the legitimacy gained by the Fifth Republic during the 1970s was that the Socialist Mitterrand could win the presidency just twelve years after de Gaulle left office.

Mitterrand's election was an indication of another major change to occur in France during the 1970s, the rise of the political left. The Socialist and Communist parties began the decade still smarting from the legislative elections of June 1968. The 20 percent of the vote won by leftist candidates represented a post-war low for the PS and PCF. Yet, the "Ice Age" of the left rapidly thawed between 1970 and 1980. With the founding of the UGSD political alliance and the creation of the Common Program, the Socialist and Communist parties together won over 50 percent of the vote and picked up an additional eighty seats in the National Assembly during the legislative elections of March 1973. Mitterrand came within 400,000 votes of capturing the Elysée during the presidential election held the next year. The legislative elections of March 1978 only confirmed the left's spectacular rise. Together, the PS and PCF won nearly 50 of the vote, and the UGSD displaced the Gaullist party as the dominate force in the Assembly, controlling 200 of the 495 seats. Mitterrand's victory in the presidential election of May 1981 was the final step in a long journey for the Socialist and Communist parties. Indeed, Johnson is correct to label the 1970s the "launching pad" from which the French left ascended into political power.⁷

Of course, the meteoric rise of the left between 1970 and 1980 was as significant as the dramatic decline experienced by the Gaullist party during the same period. The UDR entered the decade controlling 296 of the 495 seats in the Assembly. In June 1969, nearly 60 percent of French voters selected the Gaullist Pompidou to succeed de Gaulle as president of the Republic.

⁷ Johnson, *The Long March of French Left*, 287.

The party even began to attract support from regions like Languedoc and the Côte d'Azur, whose inhabitants historically leaned to the left. Yet the reluctance of Gaullist leaders to promote extensive reform during the 1970s alienated an important portion of their constituency. While some voters continued to endorse the orthodox brand of Gaullism promoted by Pompidou and Chirac, the party was no longer France's most dominant by the end of the decade. Between 1970 and 1980, the Gaullist electorate was increasingly confined to its traditional strongholds like Limousin and Auvergne. The party boasted half as many deputies (150) in the Assembly as it did in 1970. And the top Gaullist candidate, Chirac, received less than 5 million votes during the presidential election of May 1981. Thus, the Republic built by de Gaulle no longer belonged exclusively to the Gaullists by the end of the 1970s.

The decline of the Gaullist party and the rise of the left during the 1970s were far from mutually exclusive events. Rather, the fate of both groups was directly related to how each responded to the street demonstrations, seizure of schools, and worker sit-ins of May 1968. On one hand, the Socialist and Communist parties closed ranks and committed themselves to a single reform program that both groups found acceptable. On the other hand, the Gaullist party divided over the issue of political and social change. While the events of May 1968 convinced some Gaullists of the need to abandon the status quo, leaders like Pompidou and Chirac pursued their own agendas at the expense of political reform. Gaullist resistance to change during the 1970s had a profound impact on the political landscape of France. The failure of the party to embrace reform disaffected its moderate base of support. The orthodox posturing of Gaullist deputies also frustrated efforts by Giscard to secure far-reaching change. In doing so, the RPR made Giscard vulnerable to much criticism and ultimately weakened his position in the presidential election of May 1981. The election of the Republic's first leftist president was the

result. “The wish for change,” Chirac admitted to a group of Gaullist deputies two days after Mitterrand’s inauguration, “must be respected.”⁸ It would have certainly been valuable advice, if only taken a decade earlier.

⁸ Quoted in Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 65.

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