

Franz M. Oppenheimer

THE PARADOXES OF FRENCH POLITICS

Thanks to the right, the center holds.

It is no accident that France has the highest birthrate in Europe. France's core remains sound. There is no anti-nuclear hysteria, no anti-Americanism, no Spenglerian gloom. We have no other ally equally reliable. It is true that French governments, like the best of spouses, have not always been easy allies; and the justification for French refusal to grant overflight rights during the recent American airstrike against Libya was in the bizarre tradition of Gaullist *amour propre*: there would be no participation in a military action, Prime Minister Chirac said, when France is not an equal, active partner from the mission's inception.

Still, the essence of reliability cannot be deduced from an isolated, non-crucial governmental decision. It lies instead in a democratic country's public opinion. The significant comparison is not between Mrs. Thatcher's assent and M. Chirac's refusal, but between the disapproval of President Reagan's strike against Qaddafi by two-thirds of the British and by three-fourths of the Germans, and its approval by two-thirds of the French.

These figures must remind us that in England and Germany continued support for NATO will be at risk in the next elections. In both countries, the opposition calls for a repudiation of the established nuclear defense policy of NATO and of the United States. In Germany, moreover, it is not only the Social-Democratic and Green opposition that attack the defense policies of the United States. Even in conservative newspapers like the *Rheinische Merkur* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, one can read articles that mention Afghanistan and Vietnam in the same breath and that ignore the Soviet Union's violations of SALT II while at-

tacking President Reagan's arms policy. Even more significantly, *Der Spiegel*, the only German weekly news magazine, which is must reading for every German official and businessman every Monday morning, equals the late Dr. Goebbels in the venomous baseness of its reporting on the United States. One sees its effect and that of its running dogs even on those Germans, young and old, who profess to be pro-American and pro-NATO.

This is why the United States must look to France for sure support in the continuing struggle for the survival of decency in the world, and why what has happened in France this spring should be understood. For contrary to the impression conveyed by almost all French and American media, the French legislative elections of March 16, which elevated the conservative Chirac to the post of prime minister, were far from an ambiguously narrow victory for the conservatives; they were a conservative landslide of historical proportions.

The standard view assumes that the Socialists have remained the strongest party and that the right-wing National Front is somehow too far beyond the pale to be counted among the conservatives. In fact, the Socialists are the largest party only by semantic legerdemain. The two large majority parties, Giscard d'Estaing's UDF and Chirac's RPR, are not separated by ideology, or, in any event, their voters are not. Their separation is due to the trivia of personalities. In the Socialist party, by contrast, the ideological rift between the high-church Marxists on its left (Mermaz, Jospin, Quille, Chevenement) and the pragmatists (Delore, Fabius) on its right is critical. Germany furnishes an analogy to the separate majority parties in France: Kohl's CDU and Franz Josef Strauss's CSU are separate parties without materially different policies.

Nor should the National Front be excluded when appraising the repudiation

of socialism. Jean-Marie LePen, its leader and founder, is not a totalitarian; the party supports the democratic constitution and institutions of the Gaullist Fifth Republic. Indeed it is a testimonial to the magic of Communist propaganda that breaking bread and warming cabinet chairs with unreconstructed Stalinists of the French Communist party is still deemed quite seemly, while any cooperation with the National Front, such as a local tactical alliance for the election of a regional president, is likened to a black mass, or called, in the words of the last Socialist prime minister, Laurent Fabius, "gangsterism."

Recent election statistics tell the story: In the legislative elections of 1973 the combined left (Communists, Socialists, and left splinter parties) obtained 59 percent of the popular vote; in 1978 they fell to 52 percent; in 1981,

56 percent; and on March 16, 1986, 41 percent. In last spring's election the conservatives, including the National Front, obtained 55 percent of the popular vote, virtually the same percentage the left obtained in their great victory of 1981.

Thus for the first time in thirteen years the vote for the left has sunk considerably below 50 percent. And even more significant than this decline was the shift to the right within that vote: In 1973 the Communists were by far the strongest party of the left, accounting for more than half of its votes; in 1983 the Communists accounted for less than one-third of that total.

For a long time France was about equally split between left and right; in the words of Serge July, in his informative account, *The Mitterrand Years*, "in theory at least, only one or two percentage points made the difference between victory and defeat for the two great coalitions in the Fifth Republic."



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Now there is a conservative majority by a margin of 14 percent.

The conservative dominance was further demonstrated by last spring's elections of the presidents of France's twenty-two major regions, which, under the reforms enacted by the Mitterrand government, now enjoy significant autonomy. Only two of those regions retained a Socialist president. The elections also confirmed that the National Front cannot be counted out of the conservative majority, for five of those twenty presidencies were obtained, and could only have been obtained, with the votes of the National Front.

Thus in the spring of 1986 the center of gravity of the French nation as a whole, as well as the center of gravity of what the Socialists have called "the People of the Left," shifted dramatically to the right. And just as that shift itself has frequently failed to be recognized, so the nature of the Mitterrand government has been widely misunderstood in the United States. There was a widespread perception, deliberately nourished by some French diplomats, that nothing essential had changed in France under Mitterrand—that the same capable high civil servants who had always run the country were continuing to run it. The massive nationalizations of all big banks and most remaining major private industries were noted, but taken lightly; after all, had not even de Gaulle nationalized Renault and the three largest banks, and did not even capitalist Germany have major government-owned industries? The Mitterrand regime, in short, was perceived, at worst, as a benign social-democratic rule, like that of Helmut Schmidt in Germany. Had that been the case, we'd need not

bother to take much interest in last spring's change.

But it was not the case. The Mitterrand government had run a radical campaign in 1981, and once in power it embarked on a radical program. Nationalizations alone would not have constituted such a dramatic change, for it makes little difference whether the shareholders of a company are governments or private persons. What does make a difference is when the managers of a company receive frequent and preemptory orders from political of-

the faithful, Paul Quiles, a party poohbah, said:

Believe me, dear comrades, that no one will thank us for leaving in their place all those in high places of business and government who are our adversaries, and we must not be afraid to say so. . . . Nor must we be satisfied to say so in an evasive way, like Robespierre in the Convention of the Eighth Thermidor 1794: heads will roll. We must say which ones, and we must say it fast.

Those sentiments were echoed a few

months later in a newspaper interview given by a minister of commerce, M. Deléclis: "After the 12th of May [the date of the 1981 election] we should have fired some, jailed others and even shot some."

Utterances like these sprang from an almost endearingly anachronistic view of the "class struggle." During the campaign the "People of the Left" were contrasted with the ruling "People of the Chateaux." At a meeting in the prime minister's office in the spring of 1982, a prefect criticized such rhetoric against businessmen, saying that most company presidents, especially those of medium and small companies, would be ready to work with a Socialist government if only they were addressed in a friendly fashion. Red in the face, the first Socialist prime minister, Pierre Mauroy, said: "You have not been appointed to defend the bosses against the workers, but to cultivate with us our socialist earth."

The most sinister display of this almost totalitarian intolerance was made in the Mitterrand government's relations with the media. Although Mitterrand had been a vociferous critic of the preceding government's control of television, his government controlled it with even a heavier hand, and yet was criticized by its apostles for not extending its control far enough. Thus M. Mermaz, then-president of the National Assembly and one of the most doctrinaire Marxists in the party, complained after the Socialists' defeat in the cantonal elections of March 1982:

We must educate public opinion. We require everywhere people who understand change. I must tell you frankly, that we are not being helped in this work of education by the media, by the collectivity of audiovisual media—we do not have a television for change.

To see and hear him make that statement on television was a chilling experience. Less sinister, but more immediately destructive, were the Socialists' economic fantasies. The Socialist party congress of 1979 announced that "it is not our goal to modernize or mitigate capitalism, but to replace it with socialism." What kind of socialism was partly explained on another occasion by M. Mermaz; it was to be a system, he said, situated between that of Sweden and that of the USSR. He did not say to which it should be closest.

If there is growing unemployment, it is because the ruling class wants it. Big Capital uses unemployment like a purge. The steering wheel of unemployment constitutes for the economic system incarnated by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing a tactical weapon to contain the working class, and a strategic one, to integrate our country in the international division of labor.

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officials. Such became the case in France after May 1981. Nor was it true that the even tenor of the established civil service continued undisturbed. Socialist or Communist sympathies, if not party membership, became mandatory for holding governmental office down to what in the United States would be the bureau-chief level. Similar purges were visited upon the old and the newly nationalized companies. Distinguished and nonpolitical bankers and industrialists had to take makeshift jobs, teach high school, or just do nothing, while reliable party members, sometimes most obscure ones, flourished as new-baked chief executive officers of giant enterprises.

None of those upheavals could come as a surprise to those who had followed Socialist oratory during and after the election campaign of 1981. At the party's congress in October 1981 the voices of the Jacobins were raised high. Accompanied by the frenetic applause of

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good economic sense. Had he followed his original instinct not to give in to the economic pressures from the world outside France, Europe as we have known it for a generation would have come to an end. Fortunately wisdom prevailed.¹ From then on the Mitterrand government pursued an economic policy that could no longer be seriously criticized by the right.

As could be expected, the defeat of the left at the polls this year was blamed not only by the Communists but also by the Socialist left wing on the government's economic turnabout. Not long after the elections the rhetoric and the vocabulary of 1981 returned to Socialist gatherings. There was again talk of a "new class alliance," "the matrix of the workers' movement," "the ideology of the dominant classes and nations," "the political work of

¹The turmoil of those ten days is described in Serge July's *Les Années Mitterrand* (Paris, 1986).

the masses," and of "the alliance of social forces."

That is why the recent conservative shift is so important, and why a speedy return to power by the Socialists might well jeopardize the economic progress made since 1983; the pragmatic common sense of the last Socialist government under Prime Minister Fabius, and hence, once again, the integrity of the European Community, would also be endangered. True, such setbacks would not directly imperil the political and military defense of Western Europe against the Soviet menace; on that score France is sound under whatever government now conceivable. Yet the consequences of economic turmoil are never wholly predictable.

The chances of a premature return of the Socialists to power have been evoked by an astonishing comeback of President Mitterrand's popularity in the polls. Raymond Barre, Giscard's last prime minister and an aspirant to the presidency, fears that in the glow of popularity President Mitterrand may resign, and be re-elected for

another term of seven years; that he would then dissolve the National Assembly, and that the French people would wish to give him again the parliamentary majority he would need to govern instead of merely to reign.

There are good reasons for believing that this prognosis is wrong. President Mitterrand's standing in the polls, though still impressive, has been in steady decline since May. More importantly, the French people have good reasons to value him as chief of state and as an individual. Their approval of the "cohabitation" of a conservative government with a Socialist president is not only based, as many French commentators believe, on the French love of paradox and backstage infighting. Many Frenchmen have always resented not having a political choice in the center; the checks and balances of cohabitation have given them that choice.

Moreover, President Mitterrand has stature. He fits General de Gaulle's prescription for a leader: He is complex and mysterious. He showed courage

when as a young minister of veteran affairs he fired every Communist senior official in his ministry even though Communists made up the largest political party, with 28 percent of the vote. As president he visits obscure old friends when they are sick, he never misses a funeral, and he does not forget his friends' widows. During his first year as president he gave the Legion of Honor to every one of his fellow students who had lived with him at the same student hostel in Paris. His love for French literature and the French countryside cannot be doubted by anyone who has read his published journals.²

Yet appreciation of such qualities in a president does not necessarily make one a voter for the Socialist party. A Socialist comeback, in sum, is unlikely, and the prospects for "singing tomorrows" in a vital non-Socialist France are bright. □

²The complexities of Mitterrand's life and character are brilliantly presented in Catherine Nay's *Le Noir et Le Rouge* (Paris, 1984).

Benjamin J. Stein

THE BAD GIRLS OF GAMMA NU

The trouble started at USC when they thought Marie was Schmooley Lipsher's daughter.

About five years ago, my best friend and writing-partner, whom I will call Schmooley Lipsher, hired a part-time messengerette. She was a freshman at Pierce College, straight out of a girls' parochial school in Burbank. She was a cheerful, extremely beautiful young woman, almost a dead ringer for the young Sophia Loren, and they hit it off immediately.

Two years after she started, more or less, she decided that she urgently had to go to the University of Southern California. This was not just important, but a matter of life or death. Her grades were miserable, but Marie (as I will call her) was and is a stubborn girl. If her grades wouldn't do it, she would turn the trick by writing a perfect ad-

missions essay. She would simply force my writing-partner and me to help her write and re-write her essay until it was good enough to get her in. We all worked for weeks on her essay on

"California—Where The Good Feeling Never Stops," and Marie was accepted.

As soon as she got into USC, Marie pledged a sorority. It was one of the best "priss houses" on campus. It had

a huge white facade and columns and a green lawn, and rows of blonde girls with even teeth and pearls and ribbons in their hair. There were only two little hitches in her pledging, as Marie recalls.

The first was when a panel of "actives" asked Marie for written documentation of her father's and her mother's names and their parents' names, which was a lot of trouble, but Marie did not really think about it. "I figured it was just to make sure we were really enrolled at SC," she said. The second was when Marie had "Presentation." Her parents were on a tour of Ireland. She asked Schmooley and my wife to stand in for them, and they did. "A couple of the actives asked me what relation they were, and when I said he was my boss, they seemed very relieved," Marie said. But, again, Marie did not think about the whole subject for long.



Benjamin J. Stein is a writer, producer, and movie actor in Hollywood. His latest book is *Her Only Sin* (St. Martin's).