

The Grand Strategy of de Gaulle

To maintain balance of power
the seemingly mercurial President of France
practices the ancient art of equipoise.



THE PRESIDENT of France and his restless, troubled country are not, of course, synonymous; but de Gaulle himself would probably be the last to deny that his motto might well be *L'état, c'est moi*, and a lot of Frenchmen would agree with him. John L. Hess, the correspondent of *The New York Times* in Paris, is clearly angry at the way de Gaulle in particular and France in general have been treated—mishandled might perhaps be a better word—in the American media and misrepresented in American opinion. “America,” he writes in *The Case for de Gaulle* (Morrow, 154 pp., \$5), “has gone out of its collective mind on the subject of France.” Leaders in this country have denounced de Gaulle as a “mortal enemy,” a “renegade friend,” a “homicidal lunatic,” and “the most ungrateful man since Judas Iscariot.” Hess believes that this is an American “paranoiac delusion,” resulting from poor information about France and its President. “The French point of view,” Hess writes, “has been consistently scanted.”

There is a French point of view, he insists, and it is an important one. Hess’s objective is to correct the wild distortions and to put de Gaulle and his policies in proper perspective. He believes that not only does de Gaulle’s viewpoint merit attention but also that the President of France has been right more often than not. As examples, we can take two widely held misconceptions about de Gaulle—his presumed anti-Americanism and his alleged anti-Semitism.

On the subject of America, Hess quotes a revealing interview with U.S. Ambassador Charles E. Bohlen in Paris in 1967. Asked by an American correspondent whether it was not true that “Charley” (de Gaulle) gets up every morning and asks himself what he can do today to hurt the United States and then proceeds to do it, Ambassador Bohlen replied: “You know, I have talked with General de Gaulle maybe forty times over the last five years and I’ll tell you: *I don’t think he’s anti-American at all* Time and again, he likes to talk of power relations like solar systems. He just doesn’t think a small or medium-sized country should get too close to a great power; it would get pulled into its orbit.”

Basically, then, de Gaulle is not against America as such but against America’s big-power politics, which he considers a menace to French independence. He is equally emphatic in his opposition to Soviet power, and for the same reason. Hess thinks that such a policy of independence, far from being inimical to America, “may conceivably be in the best interest of the United States.” De Gaulle believes that a Europe consisting of independent and economically healthy states, satellites neither of the West nor the East, would serve as a powerful balance and a force for peace. Hess is inclined to agree. “I am not a Gaullist,” he writes, “but I

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think Americans should know that, in the areas where we differ, there is a case for de Gaulle."

In regard to anti-Semitism, an issue always charged with strong emotions, Hess attempts to put de Gaulle's views on Israel in necessary perspective, and if he does not fully succeed, it is because of the complexity of the subject. Is de Gaulle anti-Semitic? Hess doubts it—and this reviewer agrees with him.

In a now famous press conference of last year, de Gaulle meant to give a tongue-lashing to the Israelis, his former allies, for not having heeded his advice. In the course of it he said that the Jews were "an élite people, sure of itself, and *dominateur*." This was widely interpreted as an anti-Semitic remark, and an avalanche of vituperation descended upon him. But, as Hess points out, de Gaulle actually meant it as a compliment, suggesting that the Jews had qualities of great strength and endurance (which he wished the French had too). Far from being pejorative, de Gaulle explained in a letter to Ben-Gurion, his statement was meant to convey the idea that thanks to its qualities "this strong people was able to survive and remain itself after nineteen centuries passed under unheard of conditions." Hess notes that the French word *dominateur* is subject to several translations—"dominating," "wanting to dominate," "domineering." The opposite of *dominateur* is "humble, oppressed, submissive." Clearly, the Israelis were not in the latter category, and de Gaulle's use of the word *dominateur* was the opposite of a slur.

De Gaulle's Middle East policy, which has been evolving from support for Israel, through neutrality, to his present pro-Arab stand, is not motivated by personal feelings but by his conception of grand strategy. Nor is it permanent. In calculating any policy he is not guided

by attachments, either personal or ideological. Concerning Israel he is neither pro-Jewish nor anti-Jewish, any more than he was pro-American or anti-American when he kicked NATO out of France. The key to an understanding of de Gaulle's foreign policy, with its seemingly capricious shifts, is the balance of power. If international balances alter—as they always do in any living situation—so does de Gaulle. This icy-nerved political gambler is today probably the greatest practitioner of the ancient art of *equipoise*, acting not out of cynicism but out of a coherent (and not very popular) philosophy. His spiritual ancestor is not Machiavelli but Metternich.

SO complex and fascinating a figure as de Gaulle stirs up deep interest as well as admiration and hatred, and in France, we are told, the study of Gaullism, or Gaulliana, has become a sort of minor industry. Jacques de Launay's *De Gaulle and His France* (Julian Press, 316 pp., \$7.50) is one of those many efforts to explain the subject, but it falls far short of its goal. It fails to fulfill the promise of its subtitle, "A Psychopolitical and Historical Portrait," for it contains no real psychological interpretation and but limited historical analysis. In essence, the book is made up of unintegrated data and numerous quotations, a number of which, although not new, are worth retelling. This is especially true of de Gaulle's more cryptic remarks and sardonic wit. Thus when, at the age of ten, he fell off a banister and was asked whether he was not afraid, he replied: "Afraid? Haven't I got a lucky star?" In referring to the threat of England's enslavement to the United States, he jested, "Of course, the English will be allowed to keep their traditions for the benefit of American tourists: the judges' wigs, the Horse Guards, and the cat o' nine tails." There are other good quotations in the book, but on the whole it is a thin rehash.

Red Flag/Black Flag (Putnam, 252 pp., \$6.95; Ballantine paperback, 95¢) and *The New French Revolution* (Harper & Row, 501 pp., \$8.95) do not deal with de Gaulle directly, although, as France's central contemporary figure, he is always present. The authors of *Red Flag/Black Flag*, Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville, are Anglo-Irish journalists, correspondents for the London *Observer*, with experience in international and French politics. Their book is a detailed study, based on eyewitness accounts and interviews, of last spring's turbulence in Paris, an event which, they write, was of a nature to make the mind reel and on a scale "to break the seismograph." Hence the subtitle of their book is "French Revolution 1968."

The essential points they make about that revolution can be summarized as

follows: The French educational system, rigidly bureaucratized and unresponsive to modern needs and ideas, has been incapable of serving the national purpose. There was neither planning for the future nor thinking about how to meet the educational problems of an increasingly urban-industrial society or the inexorable pressure of numbers. A post-World War II generation of Frenchmen began a rush to acquire a higher education, but the decrepit university system, unchanged since the nineteenth century (perhaps since Napoleon), was not even remotely ready for them. In 1946, for example, there were 123,000 university students in France; in 1958, 514,000. Very little was done to meet the pressing situation. "The dam," warned Minister of Education Christian Fouchet in 1966, "will break one day if we do nothing."

The second point made by Seale and McConville is that France's students, as well as other young people, have become passionately politicized, but their politics differs from the radicalism of the past. They are neither Socialist nor Communist nor any other "ist." They have, in fact, no coherent political program. Youth is merely in rebellion against the whole existing Establishment—including the Communist Party, which is no longer really revolutionary. "Politics," Seale and McConville write, "has conquered the young in France, absorbing energies which in other countries go into model aircraft building, ham radio, the pursuit of pop idols, sports. But it is politics of a special kind . . . A central point about the Left-wing flood, which . . . threatened to bring down the state itself, is that it grew up outside and against all existing political parties."

LAST spring the undisciplined students, the disgruntled professional classes, and the sullen workers almost toppled de Gaulle and the whole régime. But nobody was ready for a real revolution; nobody had a blueprint for one, least of all those professional revolutionists the Communists, who apparently did not even want a genuine upset. The Communist Party seems to be content with the status quo, enjoying local power, pelf and patronage; and it is obviously not sure that it could control a successful revolution, as did Lenin's handful of Bolsheviks in 1917. As good Frenchmen, the Communists are aware that the French bourgeoisie and peasantry, despite their present discontent, are not likely to tolerate a régime that would threaten their property. Frenchmen, it has been said, are romantic about revolution, or the rhetoric of revolution, but they are always realistic about their pocketbooks.

The rebels of 1968, without a program and, in the clinches, without mass support, were defeated. The doughty de



—Pictorial Parade.

Charles de Gaulle—"His spiritual ancestor is Metternich."

Gaulle, promising to find a middle course between capitalism and Communism, a rhetorical expression without content, emerged on top once more.

But the rebellion, Seale and McConville believe, was not altogether a loss. It released "a torrent of critical energy" which, while temporarily stemmed, has not been really mastered or channelized. De Gaulle may be too old or too rigid, or both, to carry out the promised reforms, and so the torrent is likely to burst forth again.

In *The New French Revolution*, John Ardagh, an Oxford graduate and former London *Times* correspondent in Paris, tends to agree with the basic conclusions of *Red Flag/Black Flag*. But Ardagh's is a totally different sort of book. It is neither polemical nor political. It is a solid and scholarly work, dealing not with de Gaulle or politics but with something much more enduring: the life of ordinary Frenchmen in their institutional settings. He discusses industry, business, farms, families, urbanism, suburbanism, schools, arts, and communications. Ardagh has the rare gift of combining solid information with critical judgment. *The New French Revolution* is by far the best book in the English language on contemporary France, and nobody who is interested in the subject can afford to miss it.

Ardagh sees France as a society in transition, now undergoing the "throes of a belated industrial revolution." The 1968 revolt, he writes, repolarized the nation, gave impetus to reform movements, and showed the world new evidence of "French vitality and imagination." There is as yet no crystallization. The old French society is obviously breaking up and a new one is emerging, but what will it be? France, Ardagh writes, faces two dilemmas. One is whether the present revolution will bring forth a more egalitarian society, based on social justice, than had hitherto existed in that acutely class-conscious country. The other is whether the "inexorable process of modernization" will not destroy the fine traditional values of thought and civilization for which France has been famous for centuries. "Is France," he asks, "to undergo a kind of lobotomy, which will cure many of the old economic and social weaknesses, but also kill the old turbulent creativeness and individuality?" The present signs, he writes, are not encouraging. Craftsmanship is declining; the renowned cuisine is being replaced by cafeterias; art and literature are losing their originality.

President de Gaulle may well sense all this. He possesses—or suffers from—a deep feeling for past French grandeur, and he has been obviously trying to restore some of it. Will he succeed to any extent? To this question one can at this time give only a dusty answer.

Book Forum

Letters from Readers

Readers' Dissent

PHILIP ROTH's *Portnoy's Complaint* [SR, Feb. 12] is precisely what Granville Hicks has called it: "a triumph of style"—in its genre—and "very much like a masterpiece." It is also splendidly funny, engagingly honest, and utterly moving. I suppose it was inevitable that someone—in the case of SR's "dissent," Marya Mannes—would describe the book as "generating revulsion: against the Jewish family and the Jewish faith." And I suppose some Christians will lament its equally incisive, not to say devastating comments on the less noble postures of the *goyim*.

Critics of both persuasions, however, miss the mark. Roth's book succeeds precisely because it is honest, because it spares no one, least of all Portnoy himself. The novel must surely be counted as one of the most significant contributions to intercultural dialogue of this generation. It is revolutionary in its candor. I welcome it.

Perhaps equally important, Roth has set a standard for Jewish confessional novels, as Joyce set it for Irish. Both wrote "finis" to their races' literature of revolt. Both are concerned with what their people are free *for* rather than what they are free *from*. If Joyce's Dedalus goes forth at his novel's close to "forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race," Roth's Portnoy seeks release in a new identity in his psychiatrist's "punch line": "So. . . . Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?"

WILSON SULLIVAN.
Hackensack, N.J.

MARYA MANNES'S DISSENTING criticism of Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* makes three errors which invalidate anything she might say. When she attempts to discredit *Complaint* by comparing it to Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge*, she is confessing an absurd lack of literary taste and intelligence. Vidal's silly, superficial tour de force simply should not be linked in any way with Roth's novel.

She further exposes her inadequacies when she accuses Roth of being pornographic. Granville Hicks clearly explains the necessity of Roth's using scatological language. The irony is that Mannes is herself pornographic when she speaks of Vidal's "tongue-in-cheek (*cheek?*) spoof" and when she suggests that "woman gets the short end of the stick even if she gets the long end of the antihero." These puns are pleasant, but unnecessary titillations.

Mannes's other aberration is her reaction to Roth's treatment of the female. She considers *The Monkey* "abominable." My personal feeling is that *The Monkey* is interesting, exciting, and saddening. Mannes assumes Roth is applauding *The Monkey's* "New Freedom." But isn't Portnoy more than just pleased by her? Isn't he dismayed and horrified by the incompleteness of their relationship, by his own treatment of her? Isn't Roth doing much the same sort of

thing that Updike does with *Couples*? Roth's fictional environment is far too complex for Mannes's simple-minded simplifications.

RUSH RANKIN.
Blacksburg, Va.

GRANVILLE HICKS IS RIGHT: we don't have to read Philip Roth's new novel. But why must Hicks and other reviewers go all intellectually lah-de-dah to justify (?) what is actually plain, bigger-than-wallet-size pornography? Why don't reviewers come right out with it?

LA MONTE CRAPE.
Butler, Pa.

Reason for Dislike

IN THE EXCERPT from *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson* [SR, Feb. 15] Eric F. Goldman attempts to explain the unpopularity of Johnson by saying he was "not a very likable man." This is not by any means an explanation of his unpopularity but merely a restatement of it.

I believe the real reason is that people felt they couldn't trust him. I recall very vividly a statement he made on television several years ago that he would go any place at any time to discuss a possible ending of the war in Vietnam. Shortly thereafter North Vietnam proposed a time and place, and at once Johnson rejected it. Months passed before North Vietnam would agree to meet at a time and place of Johnson's choosing. How can one trust a man who acts like that?

PHILIP CHAPIN JONES.
Naples, Fla.

THE TRAGEDY OF ERIC F. GOLDMAN is his obsession with a biographer's Jehovah complex! Within *three weeks* after Johnson's retirement Goldman comes forth with a biography of the ex-President, writing about his education, intelligence, psychology, personal and family life as if he had the omniscience of God.

ROBERT WORTH FRANK.
Denver, Colo.

WHAT I THINK IS THE TRAGEDY of Lyndon Johnson is his drive and his hatreds and his stubbornness.

FREDERICK J. MILLER.
Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Edgar's Empathy

REVIEWING *Love, Death, and the Ladies' Drill Team* [SR, Feb. 15], Rollene W. Saal comments: "Edgar Arlington Robinson would well have known these small-town people, whose quiet exteriors mask an awareness of alien forces just barely beneath the surface." I feel that those alien forces were understood even better by Edwin Allan Poe.

DAVID M. GLIXON.
Ardsley, N.Y.