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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Gaullism: A personal conservatism

David S. Bell

All my life I have had a certain idea of France. This is inspired as much by sentiment as by reason. What is affective in me tends to imagine France, like the princess in the fairy tale or the Madonna in the frescoes, as dedicated to an exalted and exceptional destiny. Instinctively I have the feeling that Providence has created her either for complete success or for exemplary misfortunes.

If, in spite of this, mediocrity shows in her acts and deeds, it strikes me as an absurd anomaly, to be imputed to the faults of Frenchmen, not to the genius of the land. But the positive side of my mind also assures me that France is not really herself unless she is in the front rank; that only vast enterprises are capable of counter-balancing the ferments of dispersion inherent in her people; that our country, as it is, surrounded by the others, such as they are, must aim high and hold itself straight, on pain of mortal danger. In short, to my mind, France cannot be France without grandeur.

This faith grew as I grew, in the environment where I was born. My father was a thoughtful, cultivated, traditional man, imbued

*with the feeling of the dignity of France. He made me aware of her history. My mother had an uncompromising passion for her country, equal to her religious piety. To my three brothers, my sister and myself a certain anxious pride in our country came as second nature. As a young Lille-born boy living in Paris, nothing struck me more than the symbols of our glories: night falling over Notre Dame, the majesty of the evening at Versailles, the Arc de Triomphe in the sun, conquered colours fluttering in the vault of the Invalides. Nothing affected me more than the evidence of our national successes: popular enthusiasm when the Tsar of Russia passed through, a review at Longchamp, the marvels of the Exhibition, the flights of our first aviators. Nothing saddened me more profoundly than our weaknesses and our mistakes, as revealed to my childhood gaze by the way people looked and by the things they said: the surrender at Fashoda, the Dreyfus case, social conflicts, religious strife. Nothing moved me so much as the story of our past misfortunes: my father recalling the fruitless sortie from Le Bourget and Stains, in which he had been wounded; my mother conjuring up the despair she had felt as a girl at the sight of her parents in tears: 'Bazaine has surrendered.'*¹

This extract is taken from the famous first page of the *War Memoirs*, published in French in 1954, of Charles de Gaulle (1890–1970). It is an exercise in literary style, Chateaubriand-like in its classical elegance; and it sets the tone for the rest of the work. What is clear is that de Gaulle's conservatism prioritized the projection of France on the world stage through leadership. De Gaulle establishes himself as the patriot's patriot, taking the moral high ground with the mystical exercise in describing France (as the Madonna of the fairy tales). De Gaulle touches on events and imagery that cover the spectrum of French political currents but without tying himself to any single faction. Of course, no Republican would evoke the fairy princesses, but the reference to Fashoda (where the French and British imperialisms confronted each other in 1898) coupled with the modernistic references to flying exploits make it difficult to place: *on ne sort de l'ambiguïté qu'à ses dépens*. In evoking these images and events, de Gaulle is careful not to comment on them or to offer a critical review in keeping with his determination to overcome the divisions that are so debilitating to French life. Most politicians regard themselves as patriots, but very few can manoeuvre themselves into the position of representing their country as the embodiment of patriotism.²

General de Gaulle was a political figure of the mid-twentieth century but latterly an almost mythical persona as leader of the Free French (1940–44) and subsequently head of the Provisional Government (1944–46). Thus, de Gaulle re-emerged in the French context of national crisis in 1958 with credentials as an '*homme providential*' (or national saviour) that were already established. Unlike many of the conservative centre-right movements in Europe at this time – even Britain, with its cult of Churchill and potent wartime mythology – Gaullism was centred on an individual, but was also patriotic and nationalistic in a very forthright way, and this is a distinguishing feature.

Charles de Gaulle

Charles de Gaulle was born in Lille on 22 November 1890.³ De Gaulle's father was a school teacher and two of his mother's sisters were nuns. Charles attended military school in Saint-Cyr. As a Catholic, de Gaulle came from a milieu of '*le Ralliement*' – the decision, under papal influence, of intellectual Catholicism to reconcile itself to Republican politics and the parliamentary system. This was also the time of the papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* and the burgeoning of Catholic social policy.⁴ Under Pope Leo XIII, the Church responded to the rise of socialism and liberalism by developing a social theory that anticipated the welfare states and which developed into Christian Democracy in the twentieth century. These ideas of social Catholicism were generous, and influenced de Gaulle's associates who laid the foundations for state insurance, health and working condition regulations after the Second World War. In the First World War, de Gaulle was wounded twice and taken prisoner in March 1916 at the battle of Douaumont. De Gaulle subsequently published a number of articles and books on military strategy and history, urging in particular that the French infantry should enhance its mobility by adopting modern technology, notably tanks. These views were supposedly unwelcome in senior military circles, but proved prophetic when France was exposed to Germany's *blitzkrieg*.⁵

In 1940, de Gaulle quit France after the 16 June armistice to issue from London two days later the famous 'Call to Resistance'. That de Gaulle emerged as the undisputed leader of the Free French is a high tribute to political skills and to his unique brand of leadership. His determination to uphold the dignity of his country, even in defeat, did not endear him to Churchill or Roosevelt. He returned to France as prime minister in 1944 but resigned in January 1946. In 1947, the Rally for France (RPF) was founded to campaign for a new constitution and in defiance of the 'regime of parties' (the Gaullist 'party' was prudently called a 'rally' to avoid the impression of factionalism). This failed to make a breakthrough, and de Gaulle went into retirement until the Algerian war came to a crisis point. Famously, he returned to head the government in the Algerian crisis of May 1958, during

which the Fourth Republic's authority had evaporated in the face of an attempted coup by French forces in Algiers.⁶ De Gaulle's return to power was thus in part fuelled by a conservative demand for authority and stability in the midst of a turbulent situation which the Fourth Republic had been unable to master.

A French conservatism?

De Gaulle's political views have their place in the French conservative tradition and that defies easy transcription for an English-language audience. Despite the *Ralliement*, conservatives tended to be grudging in their acceptance of Republicanism, or indeed hostile to it. René Rémond's triptych of Bonapartism, Royalist Legitimism and Orleanism catches the essential features of French conservatism.⁷ This right wing in France was in part – at least – a disaffected aristocracy and that gave an insurrectionary aspect to some of its movements. Possibly because of the emphasis that Gaullism places on leadership, it was often dismissed as a contemporary version of Bonapartism. In the emphasis on the strong state, leadership and the necessity for state intervention in the economy, the Gaullist movement did indeed have affinities with the attitude of the two Napoleons. De Gaulle's use of the referendum, often depicted as Bonapartist, was probably a reaction to the problem of legitimacy during the U-turn of the Algerian war (taking Algeria to independence) than to an affinity with Napoleon III. Likewise the 'Orleanist' strand could be found in de Gaulle's acceptance of the role of business and the market economics of the conservatives recruited into the Fifth Republic's service, such as the economist Jacques Rueff and the small business political figure Antoine Pinay.

De Gaulle does pay homage to the household gods of the conservative sub-cultures but then constructs a synthesis that transcends its original elements, bringing French conservatism into the modern age freed from ancient quarrels and now embracing the Republican idea.⁸ Reference has often been made to the religiosity of de Gaulle's family, but he regarded faith as a private business and it did not inform much of his political action. After 1968, when widespread unrest had almost destabilized his regime, de Gaulle turned to ideas incorporated in the papal encyclical *Mater et magister* (1961) notably those of worker participation in industrial decision-making. These themes had not previously been priorities for him. De Gaulle also lacked sympathy with the changes in the 1960s (in personal morality, for example) that were a key element behind the 'events' of 1968. In effect, the brutal shock of the May 1968 events had forced de Gaulle to turn to ideas of social policy that were never fully implemented before his abrupt departure in 1969.

Coming from the milieu of Catholic conservatism as he did, de Gaulle was, notwithstanding, not tempted by the violent and anti-Republican

Action française, although the movement's founder Charles Maurras (1868–1952) admired him. In these traditional Catholic classes the influence of *Action française* was pervasive and it persevered even after its condemnation by the Vatican in 1926. Thus, de Gaulle's condemnation of the party system and his appeal to the nation (a characteristic trope of the far right) made many suspicious of his ambitions, but de Gaulle did not use these terms in a reactionary, 'maurrassien' way and was far more inclusive than *Action française*. De Gaulle was not, however, a Republican in the sense of believing that the National Assembly was the repository of sovereign authority entrusted to it by the French people. In effect, de Gaulle set up a competing legitimacy – the presidency – not recognized in Republican thinking (or in the constitution). De Gaulle's determination to ensure legitimacy through investiture by the Assembly on his return to power in 1958 (by 329–224 votes) was significant in this respect. However, the list of symbols in the cited passage from de Gaulle's *War Memoirs* does not read like a Republican litany. For a Legitimist outlook is clear in de Gaulle's rhetorical denunciation of the Republican elites of parties and in his adoption of a style of monarchical comportment.⁹

Modernizing France

Gaullists regarded themselves as the exemplars of modern and dynamic France (as opposed to the old parties of the previous Republics) and as the artisans of a new beginning.¹⁰ They were, in their own estimation, the harbingers of the scientific, entrepreneurial and far-reaching France that had a cultural '*rayonnement*' like no other European society. De Gaulle's supporter André Malraux (1901–76) claimed that the movement enjoyed broad support throughout French society, comparing it to 'the rush hour crowd on the metro'. This was true, but only to a point; for example, the Gaullist 'crowd' contained few representatives of the idealistic young people who figured so prominently in the events of May 1968.¹¹

De Gaulle's conservatism was not a free-market creed. It was more a pragmatism of 'whatever works', designed to develop and bolster the French state wherever this projected French interests. Rémond pointed out that the Gaullist vision was similar to the Bonapartism of the Second Empire in its emphasis on France's position, its determination to pursue the modernization of the country using the leverage of the state and its intent to unify the country. De Gaulle assumed that the purpose of government was to develop the common good and defend the national interest; he dismissed the liberal assumption that these ideas could emerge from a competition between private interests, in which the state merely held the ring. Thus the state, as in Catholic social doctrine, plays a positive role and represents the interests of the national community, rather than abetting the sectional or factional interests which, as de Gaulle saw it, had debilitated previous Republics.

There is a general and national interest, and it does not necessarily coincide with the interests of particular groups and business also had to take its place under the state's purview. One example is the *bouilleurs du cru*, the home-made fruit brandy that was initially distilled by farmers but then passed on as a hereditary right.¹² This right was held by 300,000 or so distillers – few of them farmers – and the inability to act against the 'social scourge' (as it was called) of alcoholism was held against the Fourth Republic. In 1959, the hereditary right was abolished by de Gaulle's government.

France's status

Taken at face value, de Gaulle's attempts to promote France as a major player amid the ideological confrontations and power politics of the Cold War were not plausible. Neither the deployment of French nuclear weapons nor the alliance with West Germany could substitute for support from America (and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO]) and was misleading. De Gaulle's doctrine on nuclear weapon deployment was incoherent but had the political advantage of high patriotic tone and high visibility.¹³ De Gaulle's withdrawal from the NATO military organization in 1966 was designed to show that France – particularly in the Mediterranean theatre – had to be given a substantial role commensurate with its rank. The Gaullist idea that the other European powers, like Chancellor Adenauer's West Germany, could put themselves under French protection verged on the ludicrous.

As set out in the extract, the second aspect of this outlook is the idea of '*Grandeur*'. France cannot be France without *Grandeur* – something that is not the same as great power status although the idea of position, respect and authority is encompassed by *Grandeur*. Here the emphasis is on independence and the autonomy of state decision-making. This could be understood to be a swipe at the mediocre ambitions of the previous Republics, and was taken by many to be a commitment to Empire; but in de Gaulle's lexicon it meant that France had to take its place as one of the Great Powers and to be taken seriously. Thus, de Gaulle's famous and flamboyant vetoes of the United Kingdom's application to join the European Economic Community (EEC) (1963 and 1967) and his controversial speech in Quebec in July 1967 were used to project French influence within and beyond Europe.¹⁴

De Gaulle's Europe

Despite his vetoes of UK membership of the EEC (at least in part on the pretext that the country was insufficiently '*Communautaire*') de Gaulle's own attitude to European integration was not wholly dissimilar to the views of British 'Euroscptics', in the 1960s and later. His position was based on the Common Market's potential to restrict states' freedom of action. This,

of course, neglected the way that the EEC, established under the Fourth Republic, promoted and amplified the position of France itself. In the event, and with calculation, the French position in Europe was not dismantled by de Gaulle, and Europe was used to advance French interests, notably in agriculture.¹⁵

De Gaulle's idea of an intergovernmental Europe of nation states was close to the United Kingdom's and far from the project of the original founders, including his countryman Jean Monnet (1888–1979).¹⁶ De Gaulle's writings depict Europe as a continent in which the old states performed a stately minuet in an eighteenth-century balance of power. This Europe no longer existed and was obviously at odds with the ideological divisions of Europe into two blocs in east and west, with the east controlled by the USSR. Moreover, de Gaulle's Europe would be under French rather than American leadership. De Gaulle's dismissal of the United Kingdom as an American Trojan Horse failed to recognize that the enemy was already inside the walls: West Germany would not exchange the Atlantic partnership for a French-led community. De Gaulle's construction of a Franco-German special relationship built on European foundations was limited by *realpolitik* which underlined the dominance of the United States in European affairs.

De Gaulle's notion of French independence ran against the impediments of international institutions and that included the United Nations. However, his vision was also a way of asserting a French individuality and providing cover for an eccentric path in foreign relations that accomplished the aim of reviving France's position as a power that had to be reckoned with, even if de Gaulle himself had to accept that it was not a 'super-power' like the United States and the USSR. By the same token, de Gaulle believed that France enjoyed a special concord with the USSR. Unrealistic as it was, de Gaulle's determined re-establishment of France as a major actor on the European stage was successful in its short-term purpose of maintaining national pride after the repeated humiliations of the 1940s and 1950s, and left a more lasting legacy in French foreign policy. This emphasis on French culture and policy, it should be remembered, came at a time when the Communist Party was strong and when the centrists of the Fourth Republic took European integration as their issue. Communists polled about 20% of the vote in this period and proclaimed their attachment to the Soviet Union, the workers' fatherland, and their ideological influence was enormous. Socialists and other centre parties were internationalist in outlook and at this time were proud of their role in promoting European institutions.

Although de Gaulle's assumption that the European Cold War division would be effaced as the old nationalisms reasserted themselves was not dropped, the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact Armies in 1968 contradicted his viewpoint. Soviet armed intervention to replace the fleeting liberalism of the 'Prague Spring' with a compliant and repressive regime showed that it was unrealistic in the short term. In particular, de Gaulle's assumption that the end of the Cold War would lead to a Europe in

which France was the preponderant power took no account of how France could handle a united Germany which would be inevitably preponderant on the continent. De Gaulle's mid-1960s strategy of undermining the US dollar with the intent of creating a new gold standard was also unrealistic but, perhaps, something of an irritation in the monetary system then in operation.

De Gaulle was of the generation and background that regarded the Empire and imperial mission as part and parcel of French international politics. Yet it fell to him to complete decolonization, started in the Fourth Republic, and to determine the independence of Algeria – ending the most difficult and longest of French colonial wars. Although he knew that the opponents of Algerian independence would never forgive him, de Gaulle covered France's retreat by adopting the language of liberation, now posing as the champion of the developing new nations. Again, on an objective view this was highly improbable, given France's recent history and its inability to offer tangible support to liberation movements. Yet his tactics were based on a shrewd calculation of attitudes in France, and arguably were crucial in bringing his country through the crisis.

It may have been helpful to de Gaulle that the nuclear *force de frappe* provided another role for the French forces and a boost to French status.¹⁷ Developed under the Fourth Republic, but accelerated considerably by de Gaulle, the French nuclear programme marked a concerted attempt to make up for lost ground in this crucial race for national *Grandeur*. Since the country had placed itself outside NATO's nuclear umbrella, the weapons were undeniably French; but at the time, their delivery depended on an aircraft strike force that was of doubtful value compared to the superpower arsenals of ballistic missiles.¹⁸ De Gaulle's nuclear doctrine, developed to justify this weaponry, became part of the national consensus despite its obvious limitations as military strategy.

Conservative leadership

Gaullism is, thus, a form of forceful political leadership and as such marks a recognition of de Gaulle's status and authority. De Gaulle's ideas lack originality when their various elements are judged in isolation, but in combination they represent a distinctive form of conservatism. In his memoirs, de Gaulle refers to the 'ferments of dispersion' inherent in the nature of the French as a people but thanks to his ideas as well as his personal charisma he was able to project the French state as a binding force at a time when it was faced by a variety of disruptive forces.

De Gaulle had made clear his view that authoritative political leadership had to be provided in a Republican era but without the trappings of dictatorship that disfigured the century. He was reprising the frequent accusation by the right and left, that the Republic's leadership was

inadequate and that the emergence of the much-needed visionary leader was impeded by its introspective parliamentary elite in the Assembly. But the intention of Gaullism was not to sweep away parliamentary institutions; it was to provide leadership to them, supported by the French people.¹⁹ De Gaulle stated that *'la grandeur d'un peuple ne procède que de ce peuple'*. Yet in de Gaulle's view, the people was represented by their leader: They were in harmony. De Gaulle's belief was that he could unite a majority of the French public behind him. His conviction proved well founded in the late 1940s with the RPF movement and then in the Fifth Republic (until the repudiation of his referendum in 1969 when he drew the obvious conclusion and retired). Thus, de Gaulle spoke, in his estimation, not as a politician but as an authentic voice of the country itself.

Conclusion

Rather than accepting the 'conservative' label, Gaullists preferred to see themselves as transcending divisions of left and right and regarded themselves as the real progressives in France. This outlook was symbolized by the Gaullist deputies who, when they won the general elections in 1962, occupied the Assembly arc from left to right and forced the old parties to the back benches. But Gaullism does take its place as a conservative movement through its focus on the nation and its preoccupation with stability at a time of significant geopolitical change. After the humiliation of the French Army in the Second World War, followed quickly by capitulation in Vietnam after the defeat at Dien Bien Phu and the Algerian imbroglio, it was essential for someone to uphold the integrity of the nation as well as salvaging something of the country's international status. It is to de Gaulle's credit as a consummate politician that at a time of crisis he was able to establish the leading role of the French presidency, and to inspire a political movement which continued to cherish his example, of a style of governance and a general attitude to fast-changing events at home and abroad, which continued to attract significant support decades after his death.