The International History Review

ISSN: 0707-5332 (Print) 1949-6540 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rinh20

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To cite this article: Reed Davis (2011) A Once and Future Greatness: Raymond Aron, Charles de Gaulle andthe Politics of Grandeur, The International History Review, 33:1, 27-41, DOI: 10.1080/07075332.2011.555375

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2011.555375

The International History Review
Vol. 33, No. 1, March 2011, 27–41

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

A Once and Future Greatness: Raymond Aron, Charles de Gaulle and the Politics of Grandeur

Reed Davis*

Charles de Gaulle devoted his life to cultivating French grandeur, a politics that attempted to carve out an equal and independent role for France among the great powers of the world. One who frequently criticized de Gaulle's ideas of grandeur was the eminent social theorist, Raymond Aron. Although Aron was generally supportive of de Gaulle and supported him 'every time there was a crisis', he never hesitated to criticize de Gaulle, sometimes quite sharply. Aron's lifelong friendship with de Gaulle was thus marked by alternating bouts of mutual irritation and respect: Aron worried that de Gaulle's theatrics were sometimes detrimental to French national interests while de Gaulle fretted that Aron's commitment to French greatness was less enthusiastic than it should have been.

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate Aron's reaction to de Gaulle's politics of grandeur. Despite his reputation for 'lucidity', Aron was often ambivalent about de Gaulle's ambitions for France. We argue that Aron's ambivalence stemmed from his political creed, or from his commitment to a political philosophy that - as de Gaulle sensed - allowed for few settled convictions. This paper reviews Aron's assessment of two issues at the heart of de Gaulle's politics of grandeur, namely, the effort to promote a sense of national unity and the effort to create a nuclear force. In both areas, we witness a remarkably ambivalent Aron, one who struggled to soften the harsher edges of the excesses of what he considered to be the excesses of grandeur and find his way to a more moderate and coherent position.

Keywords: Raymond Aron; Charles de Gaulle; grandeur; history; force de frappe; democratic liberalism; France; French foreign policy

'All of my life,' Charles de Gaulle once declared, 'I have had a certain idea of France.' This idea, de Gaulle wrote in one of his most oft-quoted paragraphs,

> is inspired by sentiment as much as by reason. The emotional side of me naturally imagines France, like the princess in the fairy stories 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 in the front rank; that only vast enterprises are capable of counterbalancing the ferments of dispersal which are inherent in her people; that our country, as it is, surrounded by the others, 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 greatness.[1]

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ISSN 0707-5332 print/ISSN 1949-6540 online

DOI: 10.1080/07075332.2011.555375
http://www.informaworld.com

De Gaulle devoted his life to cultivating French greatness. And to de Gaulle's way of thinking, French greatness could be resurrected only by a politics of grandeur, or by a politics that consciously sought to carve out an equal and independent role for France among the great powers.

One who frequently cast a critical eye on the General's grand design and his commitment to a politics of grandeur was the eminent French social theorist and commentator, Raymond Aron. Although Aron admired de Gaulle and wrote in support of him 'every time there was a crisis', Aron never hesitated to criticize de Gaulle, sometimes quite sharply. Aron's lifelong friendship with de Gaulle was thus marked by alternating bouts of mutual irritation and respect: Aron frequently worried that de Gaulle's theatrics were sometimes detrimental to French national interests, while de Gaulle believed that Aron's commitment to French greatness was less enthusiastic than it should have been. As de Gaulle once explained in a lengthy letter to Aron,

> I have read *The Great Debate* as I often read what you write, in various places, on the same subject. It seems to me that if you return to it so unceasingly and with such vivacity it is perhaps because you yourself are not fully satisfied by your own position. After all, all talk of 'Europe,' the 'Atlantic Community', 'NATO', 'arms', etc. boils down to a single argument: yes or no—must France remain France? That was already the question at the time of the Resistance. You knew what my choice was and I knew that there will never be any rest for theologians.[2]

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate Aron's reaction to de Gaulle's politics of grandeur. Despite his reputation for 'lucidity', Aron was often ambivalent about de Gaulle's ambitions for France, repeatedly revisiting and revising his assessment of key elements of the General's grand design. De Gaulle, then, was right: there is indeed an element of 'restlessness' in Aron's reactions to the politics of grandeur, a restlessness that is not to be explained simply by underscoring Aron's irritation with the General's personality or peculiar style, as Aron himself claimed.[3] Rather, we argue that Aron's ambivalence stems from his political creed, or from his commitment to a political philosophy that - as de Gaulle himself sensed - allowed for few settled convictions.

This paper reviews Aron's assessment of two issues at the heart of de Gaulle's politics of grandeur, namely, the effort to promote a sense of national unity and the effort to launch the *force de frappe*, France's nuclear weapons program. In both areas, we see Aron struggling to soften the harsher edges of what he considered to be the excesses of de Gaulle's politics of grandeur. And in both cases, we see that for all of his intelligence and erudition, Aron was a thinker for whom there was indeed little rest.

Grandeur and the challenge of French unity

To de Gaulle's way of thinking, the politics of grandeur aimed at strengthening the moral and political unity of France. The politics of grandeur thus had a domestic as well as an international dimension to it. De Gaulle believed that a foreign policy 'grounded in a concern for the independence, rank and greatness of the nation is linked to and necessarily entails an attitude of honorable self regard'.[4] This self-regard was both cause and consequence of grandeur: De Gaulle believed that the patriotic ardor resulting from an enhanced standing in the world could heal the deep social divisions that so often plagued France while this newfound political

unity would propel France to even greater heights on the world stage. We begin, then, by comparing Aron's and de Gaulle's vision of domestic order. What 'vocation' - Aron's word - did Aron and de Gaulle envision for France in the latter half of the twentieth century, especially as that vocation bore on the problem of national unity?

We have elsewhere characterized Aron's politics as a 'politics of understanding', a politics that has its origins in the classical precepts of liberal democracy and human reason.[5] Aron clearly and consistently championed a form of government for France that had its roots in liberal democracy, one marked by free elections, a strong executive, checks and balances, multiparty competition, a free press, and a 'mixed' economy. With the exception of an evident willingness to accept a few quirky French innovations - a hybrid executive, decree laws - Aron consistently championed a rather conventional liberalism.

The political figure who commanded Aron's respect was thus an individual of restraint and accommodation. 'The judgment of historical man can never be pure,' Aron once wrote, 'because it is always the result of compromise.'[6] Or, as he observed on another occasion: 'Man without God risks his life for impure causes and cannot avoid doing so. He knows that humanity can create itself only through doubt and error. He acts not out of a will to be God but out of a wisdom that willingly falls short of the absolute.'[7] The politics of understanding, then, is characterized by tolerance, patience, compromise, and above all else, sympathetic understanding, or the ability to put oneself in another's shoes.

An initial difficulty in contrasting Aron's politics of understanding with de Gaulle's politics of grandeur is that de Gaulle nowhere bothered to explain with any precision just what a politics of 'grandeur' entailed. Nevertheless, Daniel J. Mahoney writes, 'commentators agree that grandeur implies the will to be a ''player'' and not a ''stake'', and to be an ''ambitious'', ''universal'', and ''inventive'' actor on the world scene.'[8] Mahoney, citing Stanley Hoffmann, underscores the fact that grandeur 'does not entail an ideology because it is ''not unalterably tied to any specific policies or forms of power''".[9] At its core, the politics of grandeur, like the politics of understanding, is a moderate politics. As Mahoney explains it,

> Gaullist grandeur cultivates an attitude of solicitude for national unity and self-respect, and not the exercise of unlimited imperial ambitions. The concern for rank is a means toward national flourishing and not an end in itself. It is an indispensable precondition for sustaining the moral and political unity of France. Unity is a precondition of grandeur, but grandeur makes possible national coherence and flourishing.[10]

Moreover, de Gaulle's drive for grandeur was guided by the spirit of 'measure' and 'proportion', or by a sense of the 'natural order of things'.[11] This suggests that a politics of grandeur, like the politics of understanding, allows for human liberty and critical freedom.

Given their mutual commitment to the rule of law and democratic freedom, Aron and de Gaulle seem, at least at first glance, to have had much in common. How then did the politics of understanding actually take to the politics of grandeur? At first, not well at all. Aron first met de Gaulle in London, where Aron was a writer for *La France Libre*, a monthly war-time journal sponsored by de Gaulle and edited by André Labarthe. Although Aron was by no means hostile to de Gaulle, he was nevertheless the only staff member of the journal who was at the time not an avowed Gaullist. In fact, Aron wrote a thinly veiled *riposte* to de Gaulle and Gaullism in

1943, entitled 'In the Shadow of the Bonapartes'.[12] In this essay, Aron analyzed and lamented France's historic infatuation with a peculiar form of authoritarianism, one which 'filled the void left by the disappearance of kings and the powerlessness of parliaments'.[13] Whatever its short-term appeal, Aron argued, Bonapartism is ultimately rent by an internal contradiction that will eventually destroy not only the regime itself but the nation under its leadership: 'It drains sovereignty from the people that it pretends to lead. It constrains and reduces to extreme servitude the people who are allegedly sovereign by reducing plebiscites to farces, by making into law the whims or good pleasure of one individual. Far from genuinely uniting groups and parties, it allows to subsist, by hiding them for a time, all the divisions in society, and limits itself to superimposing the arbitrary on chaos.' Because this regime has no other authority other than 'popular acclamations', Aron added, 'le Cesar' is driven by an insatiable need to refire the source of his authority and to that end, tirelessly undertakes new adventures: 'Condemned to subordinate the interests of his country to the transitory needs of his rule, he ends by ordering strategy according to the needs of demagogy.' In this way: 'The adventure of one man culminates in tragedy for a nation.'[14]

Because his worst fears were never realized, Aron softened his judgment of de Gaulle over time. In fact, Aron came to see in de Gaulle the promise of a republic that could rise above the 'regime of the parties' and, in so doing, attain the stability and legitimacy that had eluded France for so long. Reversing his earlier assessment that de Gaulle offered little more than authoritarianism with a human face, Aron argued that the party de Gaulle created in 1947, the Rassemblement du Peuple Francais (RPF), was a necessary response to the growing threat of communism in France and to the increasing instability of French political institutions. And so, alarmed by the growth of the Communist Party in France and, some speculate, weary of being the perennial intellectual and political outsider, Aron came full circle and joined the RPF in 1947, a move that shocked his friends.

Aron was, at least in the main, supportive of de Gaulle's domestic leadership and even joined his government for a time in the Ministry of Information under the direction of Aron's good friend, André Malraux. Indeed, Aron later described de Gaulle's presidency in words that surely left those familiar with 'Shadow of the Bonapartes' in wide-mouthed wonder. Of de Gaulle's tenure during the immediate post-war period, Aron concluded that legality was as important to de Gaulle as authority. Conceding that de Gaulle had no taste at all for the 'games, poisons and enchantments of the regime of the parties', Aron nevertheless insisted that de Gaulle had no interest in unlimited power either. 'Far from dreaming of personal power,' Aron wrote, de Gaulle 'cherishes the ambition to give France durable institutions at long last.'[15]

For all of his respect and support, however, Aron was never an 'orthodox' Gaullist, if by 'orthodox Gaullism' one means a degree of personal devotion to the General that, as Aron put it, approached 'a kind of feudal tie'. Despite the personal distance between himself and de Gaulle, Aron believed that France was deeply indebted to de Gaulle's leadership. It was de Gaulle and de Gaulle alone, Aron once declared, 'who preserved our freedoms and set himself between confusions in men's minds and chaos'.[16] It may someday happen that de Gaulle's regime will develop into a thoroughly democratic one, Aron wrote in the immediate post-war years. But for the moment, 'it is the work of a single man, admittedly a great man.' Nevertheless, Aron concluded: 'I persist in hoping that France will someday be

capable of governing herself, otherwise than by unconditional faith in a prince, even if one sometimes rejoices that the ''cunning of reason'' could have made a worse choice of the Prince.'[17]

In this grudging tribute, we catch sight of what is fundamentally wrong with the sort of charismatic leadership at the heart of de Gaulle's understanding of grandeur - it disdains 'ordinary *legalité*' in favor of what Aron termed 'mysterious *legalité*'. And ordinary *legalité* lies at the heart of what in Aron's opinion constitutes an authentically democratic regime. In Aron's words: 'For peoples as well as individuals, liberty is not recognized by the more or less illusory consciousness that individuals have of it, but by the respect for the laws, which leads to respect for persons.'[18] This is why classical liberal thought placed so much emphasis on the separation or division of power; such a division, Aron observed, 'is the rampart of legality par excellence, the obstacle that the prudence of the legislators must raise up against the arbitrary'. In fact, political philosophers like Montesquieu believed that the separation of powers was not simply a check against 'abuse and illegality' but was in fact 'constitutive of liberty itself'.[19] For Montesquieu (as well as Aron), liberty was defined above all else by 'the reciprocal limitation of powers as a guarantee of legality' and this existed only in moderate, limited regimes.[20]

De Gaulle, for his part, clearly shared Aron's hope for a society governed by law. However, de Gaulle's ideal social order, unlike Aron's, was fortified by a substantial measure of 'mystique'. Much like Charles Péguy, a thinker whom de Gaulle revered, de Gaulle believed that social life should be a *union sacreé*, a community of like-minded citizens bound together by a patriotism that Mahoney describes as 'the civic equivalent of pious devotion to the cult of the Mother of God'.[21] Infusing this ardor into a populace is the task of leadership. To de Gaulle's way of thinking, the great leader

> provides the singular and exceedingly rare form of energy necessary to give order to the human world. He puts his mark on events and thus enables men to master the conditions of their collective existence. In a very concrete manner he allows human beings to live well rather than to merely live - he allows humble souls to experience the majesty of grandeur.[22]

De Gaulle, then, believed that humans were social creatures who found meaning and fulfillment by pursuing common, noble purposes.

Aron, however, held a less elevated view of leadership and human community. Stripped of its great powers, great leaders and great doctrines, democratic society appeared to Aron exactly as it had appeared to Tocqueville - a shallow, restless tumult devoid of brilliance or grandeur. 'Doomed to moderateness,' to use Aron's phrase, democracy is by nature subject to the law of mediocrity. However, in Aron's opinion, this was a small price to pay for the matchless privilege of living in an open society devoted to tolerance and the preservation of critical freedom. And if tolerance is born of doubt, Aron added, then 'let us teach everyone to doubt all the models and the utopias, to challenge all the prophets of redemption and the heralds of catastrophe.' If only they can eliminate fanaticism, then 'let us pray for the advent of the skeptics'.[23]

To cautious or moderate pessimists like Aron, the only kind of regime compatible with such a scaled-back interpretation of history and human nature is a pluralistic one, or one where different and conflicting interests struggle peacefully for political, economic, and social power. Although such a politics sought to protect

and advance individual freedom, Aron was well aware that pluralism was not without its costs: 'It maintains an atmosphere of division and discord in the body politic, it blurs the sense of communal responsibilities and jeopardizes internal peace and friendship.' Nevertheless, 'in spite of everything', pluralism must be promoted because it is 'a means of limiting arbitrary power and ensuring a legal expression to discontent, and [stands] as a symbol of the lay impartiality of the State and the autonomy of the human mind'.[24]

Despite Aron's rather sober reading of French domestic politics, echoes of grandeur occasionally reverberate through his writings. In encouraging his fellow citizens to stay the liberal democratic course during the post-war period, for example, Aron promised a rather heady payoff should they succeed in doing so. In the Old Continent, Aron wrote, 'the scale of greatness remains that of the national states. Always of the second rank when compared to the colossus [of the United States and the Soviet Union], France will recover a radiance and an influence of the first rank on the condition that, by its interior stability and its prosperity, it creates a political and spiritual center around which will gather the smaller nations.'[25] This stirring, almost breathless description of the future - which immediately calls to mind Victor Duruy's ringing declaration that 'France is the moral center of the world'[26] - is remarkable not just for what it expects from French foreign policy but what it demands of French domestic politics as well. 'A great nation,' Aron declared, 'lives and prospers only by the constant and mysterious inspiration of a great idea,' or by what Aron elsewhere termed a 'task' (*'un projet'*). 'Does France still have a task?' Aron asked in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. 'This is not only the decisive question,' he added. 'It is, one could say, the *only* question.' In Aron's opinion, France did indeed still have a task, and a rather lofty one at that: 'The French idea,' Aron maintained, 'is to protect what is human at an hour when all conspire to deliver society to the inhumanity of enslaved masses and the pyramids of steel.'[27]

In attempting to infuse French national politics with this rather bracing measure of grandeur, Aron clearly drew not from the precepts of classical French liberalism, a philosophy that accepts the permanence of the struggle for power, but from the tenets of French republicanism, a philosophy of public virtue and a self-sworn enemy of liberalism. In France, Professor Tony Judt has observed, it was *fin-de-siècle* republicanism that 'first deployed to the full the idea that France stood for something, proselytizing an idea of civic virtue and implicitly denying any potential or actual differences or divergences in the nation itself.' If there was a goal to which this strain of republicanism aspired, Judt added, 'it was thus the creation of ''Frenchness'', an identity whose self-ascribed moral superiority would compensate for the gloomier aspects of recent history.'[28]

But how this sort of greatness comports with the sort of pluralism Aron hoped would take root in France is far from clear. What is clear, however, is that these two impulses are at odds within Aron's own work. Spurring France on to become the 'spiritual and political center' of Europe immediately after the war, Aron seemed to sour on the idea in the 1950s, when he wrote that 'the longing for a purpose, for communion with the people, for something controlled by an idea and a will' is, quite frankly, 'not for us.'[29]

Aron's ambivalence manifested itself again when he became engaged in the 'end of ideology' debate that gripped intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic at mid-century. Although the anti-ideologists (whose number included Daniel Bell, Arthur

Schlesinger, Jr., George Kennan and Seymour Martin Lipset, among others) formed no single school of thought, they generally agreed that social action should be governed wherever possible not by the airy abstractions of ideological thinking but by the more modest propositions of the social sciences. 'Few serious minds,' Daniel Bell has written, 'believe any longer that one can set down ''blueprints'' and through ''social engineering'' bring about a utopia of social harmony.'[30] Given the dismal performance of totalitarian regimes, Bell added, 'the ladder to the City of Heaven can no longer be a ''faith ladder'' but an empirical one: a utopia has to specify *where* one wants to go, *how* to get there, the costs of the enterprise, and some realization of and justification for the determination of *who* is to pay.'[31] The good society at work, then, was a relatively unexciting and unimaginative affair. As Aron described it, an open or 'non-ideological' society was one where citizens, aided by the findings of policy analysts, would come together to pass judgment on a multitude of partial and *ad hoc* policy proposals and decide on small but important matters such as the price of farm subsidies or the increase in wages for public employees.

Even in *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, however, which was widely regarded as something of a manifesto for the anti-ideology movement, Aron was nagged by doubts and anxieties over the pragmatic, non-ideological incrementalism that marks pluralist regimes. 'The substitution of scientific thought for religious truth,' Aron observed, 'cannot but entail a spiritual crisis: it is difficult to be satisfied with a provisional truth, incontestable but limited, not guaranteed to console.'[32] By 1960, Aron's idealism was in full voice once again. As Tracy Strong points out, Aron complained that many of those who rushed to embrace or tout the end of ideology did so to escape the responsibilities of action. 'Under pretense of escaping from ideology,' Strong observed, 'such men have merely uncritically embraced the dominant one and called it reality.'[33] For that reason, Aron believed that ideology was still a necessary motive force for action.

Grandeur and French foreign policy

Having railed unsuccessfully against the Anglo-American policy of German reconstruction in the immediate post-war years, de Gaulle recognized that very little remained of his plans when he returned to office in 1958. Confronted with a new and unfavorable distribution of global forces, de Gaulle reverted to another of his lifelong ideas, namely, 'the refusal to place France in one of the two blocs, the one led by the United States'. [34] Once the Algerian war had ended, Aron wrote, de Gaulle 'launched himself into what the Germans used to call *die grosse Politik*. France should measure itself against the great powers, not with the GPRA or the Tunisia of Bourguiba.'[35]

Aron's fundamental assessment of de Gaulle's grand design was, as Mahoney correctly notes, both 'ambiguous and equitable'.[36] In his memoirs, for example, Aron showered de Gaulle with words of high praise and even gratitude. Acknowledging that de Gaulle's overtures to the Soviet Union often angered and alarmed France's friends and allies, especially the United States, Aron also insisted that de Gaulle had clearly recognized the Soviet Union for what it was, namely, a totalitarian, imperial power bent on global aggrandizement. For that reason, Aron maintained, de Gaulle's primary objective was to create 'the greatest possible distance from the Atlantic Alliance without destroying or abandoning it . . .'[37] In so doing, de Gaulle's foreign policy could lay claim to some significant successes: De

Gaulle 'opposed British entry into the Common Market without provoking its breakup; he put in place a strategic nuclear force that would in the future permit a policy of deterrence ''in every direction'', and hence total independence of the two blocs.'[38] In fact, because of de Gaulle's leadership, Aron declared, 'France had potentially reached the status of a Great Power. Thanks to the permanent dialogue with Moscow, without leaving the Atlantic Alliance, it had risen to world rank.'[39] Given Aron's earlier suspicions about de Gaulle's personal ambitions and his ongoing bouts of irritation with the General's high-handed treatment of friends and allies, this was equitable judgment indeed.

Nevertheless, words of high praise were mixed with rather harsh criticisms. In reckoning with the General's legacy, Aron also pointed out that

> It was General de Gaulle who legitimated anti-Americanism. In moments of crisis, he demonstrated his solidarity with the West, but more often than not he represented France to be threatened equally by the two Great Powers. He attributed responsibility for the Six-Day War to American involvement in Vietnam. He gave the French the habit of seeing the wrong enemy, of taking the Soviet Union as an ally and the American Republic as a Great Power threatening French independence.

Aron then rounded out his judgment of de Gaulle with this - rather astonishing - sentence: 'Today, twelve years after the General's death, French diplomacy remains partially paralyzed by this inversion of roles, by a vision of the world that I consider contrary to reality.'[40]

De Gaulle's efforts to protect the independence and international stature of France hinged on the creation of the *force de frappe*, France's nuclear weapons program, and on the concomitant refusal to integrate France's armed services into the command structure of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). These accomplishments, Aron wrote near the end of his life, 'belong to the General's legacy and are still exempt from challenge'.[41] Although Aron wrote in his memoirs that he approved the establishment of a strategic nuclear force, he treated the *force de frappe* with such skepticism at times that his readers may be forgiven for wondering whether this particular legacy of Gaullist grandeur really *was* exempt from challenge.

As we have seen, Aron believed that some sort of vision or 'vocation' was essential to France's recovery of its own self-confidence. For this reason, Aron applauded France's efforts to develop a nuclear capability of its own during the 1950s. The French, he observed, were 'overjoyed' by the explosion of a bomb over the Sahara because it meant that 'their scientists have shown themselves equal to those of other countries'.[42] The burst of national pride that attended the event was 'normal, inevitable and legitimate'.[43] Even though the utility of a French nuclear force was limited, it would be valuable to France for three reasons. First, it was 'the supreme defense against blackmail or aggression' because France could now inflict substantial losses on a potential aggressor, losses that would 'appear out of proportion to the gains'. Second, even a modest nuclear force could serve 'as a diplomatic trump' in dealing with allies. Finally, even though it would be less costly for France if the Atlantic Alliance would come to share its nuclear weaponry, it must nevertheless be admitted that the: 'French production of atomic bombs is more helpful in stimulating the sharing of knowledge and of equipment than the most eloquent pleas have proven to be'. All things considered, Aron concluded, the worst that could happen to France is that it would 'bear the inconvenience of greatness without possessing its reality'.[44]

However, in pondering the problems of war and nuclear deterrence, Aron's mood gradually began to shift. Aron noted that given the nature of international political behavior and the 'age-old aspirations' of states, it would be unreasonable to expect that those who did not possess nuclear weapons would willingly forego the opportunity to acquire them. Thus, the problem 'is less to ascertain what formula would be best in itself than to avoid certain ill-fated consequences of the multiplication of costly national forces, which are of scant effectiveness and quickly outmoded by technological progress'.[45] Under these conditions, then, what must be done?

Aron's answer is not altogether clear. In *Peace and War*, Aron's magisterial work on international relations, he apparently envisioned the formation of a European deterrent force 'which, without officially depending on the American deterrent, would act only in cooperation with it'.[46] In a later work, however, Aron hedged on his call for a European deterrent force, uncertain about the institutional or operational forms that 'cooperation' would entail. As he observed: 'The question of the control of the trigger arises in connection with the European deterrent just as it does with the Atlantic one.'[47] Nevertheless, convinced that 'the time of the American (or Anglo-American) directorate is past', Aron hoped that the West (especially the United States) would do more to change NATO from a strictly military alliance into an 'authentic Atlantic community'.[48]

Broadly speaking, the solution to the problem of command and community rests on the United States' willingness 'to understand the mentality of the Europeans' and on Europe's willingness 'to trust the principles of American doctrine …'[49] More concretely, Americans must give Europeans a greater sense of participation in formulating Atlantic strategy. There is no good reason, Aron insisted, for excluding Europeans from the conception, formulation, or elaboration of a common military strategy. Relying freely on arguments advanced by Alistair Buchan, Aron argued that once Europeans 'had made a genuine contribution to the strategic concepts and operation plans, they would be willing to leave operational responsibility to the American leaders'.[50] In this plan, then, the United States would retain control of the nuclear trigger but the elaboration of an overall military posture and division of labor would be the joint responsibility of the Americans and Europeans.

If the French government accepted this proposal, Aron mused, then the United States and Great Britain would probably do the same. There was, of course, a rather large obstacle that stood in the way of an agreement of this sort, namely, Charles de Gaulle. De Gaulle's demand for military independence, so essential to his pursuit of grandeur, could be satisfied only by the creation of an exclusively national nuclear force.

Over time, however, Aron seemed to become increasingly impatient with the idea of an independent French deterrent: the *force de frappe* was too small, too vulnerable, and too expensive to be of much strategic significance. In *Peace and War*, Aron argued that a country could exert some degree of deterrent power once it acquired a nuclear retaliatory capability. By the early 1980s, however, Aron seemed to sour on that idea, doubting that 'in a test of nerves the leaders of a country risking total annihilation [were] the equals of those whose country would merely sustain some losses.'[51] In Aron's opinion, France would be better served if it submitted to common discipline and integrated its military forces into the command structure of NATO. 'To value the power of independent choice between war and peace above national security may once have been a sign of greatness,' Aron wrote, '[b]ut I do not

believe that in the thermonuclear age this should be considered an appropriate goal for the national ambition of a country such as France.'[52] Given the terrible possibilities of a nuclear war, everything, including the eternal political desire for independence, must be subordinated to the contemporary needs of security. Whatever claims to greatness that may have accrued to France through its possession of nuclear weapons, those claims by the end of Aron's life were completely submerged in the facts of military, economic, and political necessity.

Aron's ambivalence about the role of the *force de frappe* in French foreign policy seems to reflect a deeper, more fundamental ambivalence about France's role on the world's stage in the post-war years. What 'vocation' did Aron hope that France would choose for itself internationally? And was there any room in that vocation for a politics of grandeur?

On the one hand, it seems that Aron agreed with de Gaulle that post-war France needed the 'mysterious inspiration of a great idea'. Even though Aron was among the first in France to call for Algerian independence, for example, he was not opposed to the possession of colonies in principle. Colonies were, in fact, an important element of the 'inspiring idea' necessary for French greatness. As Aron explained in *Le Figaro*, France had a duty 'to keep North Africa in the sphere of modern civilization'. It is not, he pointed out, 'in order to preserve outlets for our products that public opinion is attached to ''la presence française'', so much as to maintain our country's rank and sense of mission in the world.'[53] In fact, Aron was angered by the initial American and British failure to help beleaguered French troops in Vietnam because, as Tony Judt explained, he 'shared the view widespread in the political class of his time, that France's identity was intimately bound up with her worldwide possessions and influence'.[54]

On the other hand, Aron seems to have had a very dim view of the politics of grandeur. His most extensive and systematic review of the concept of grandeur is contained in an article he wrote for the French journal, *Preuves*, in 1959.[55] What, exactly, should one make of de Gaulle's politics of grandeur, he asked. Is it a means of national revitalization or a sign of vain pretension? On balance, it seems that Aron inclined far more to the latter than to the former.

In this substantive essay, Aron reviewed de Gaulle's policies regarding Algeria, the Common Market, NATO, and *the force de frappe*. Aron's judgment of the General's accomplishments is, at times, equivocal. Of the decision to develop a strategic nuclear force, for example, Aron wrote that 'the atomic bomb in France was presented in such a manner to appear as an expression of a politics of prestige more than of power. The rational justification - that it was a necessary element of deterrence - was never invoked.' Was this an omission, Aron wondered, a blunder or a 'proof that the intentions of grandeur removed deterrence from the calculation?'[56] Beyond its deterrent significance, Aron concluded, the bomb added little to French power: 'France, on the global stage, loses more than its gains in its efforts to rival the Great Powers.' In fact, 'the disproportion of disadvantages to benefits underscores the real measure of France as much as the vanity of its ambitions.'[57]

What, then, should the French vocation be? Aron began by noting that the twentieth century had dramatically altered the scale and conditions of greatness. Formerly, 'greatness had never been separated from power'. When a people and its leaders could impose their wills on their neighbors, Aron declared, they did so. However, he added, 'this is the sort of grandeur that nations must renounce,

especially those who do not have the means to rule'. But this renunciation 'permits the attainment of another greatness', a greatness which, in the industrial age, tends to devalorize the means of force and power.[58] Declaring that the 'politics of force' is now beyond the means of France - even 'a France governed by de Gaulle and armed with a few dozen anachronistic atomic bombs' - Aron announced a new vocation for France. 'The grandeur that France can attain, especially in Africa,' Aron argued, 'will not be for the foreseeable future a grandeur of power but can only be a grandeur of peace, of influence, of culture.'[59] Henceforth, French grandeur would be measured 'neither by the number of square kilometers over which the tricolor flies and neither by the number of *fellaghas* defeated each week by the forces of order.' Instead, French grandeur will be 'a function of a double success: the modernization of the economy and the continuity of the culture.' In fact, France will be great in the eyes of the rest of the world, Aron declared, 'only to the degree that it accomplishes itself'.[60]

With this statement, we are far from the sort of grandeur that de Gaulle sought to cultivate. Aron seems here to be making the point that one finds meaning only in what one makes of oneself not in how one lives in regard to others, a point that seems to align him closer to Sartre than to de Gaulle.

In fact, Aron, Sartre and de Gaulle represent three different reactions to the problem of post-war French grandeur. In considering the post-war politics of radical philosophers such as Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, Aron argued that many post-war intellectuals fled 'to an illusory paradise buried in the foggy north or in the future'.[61] Why? Because, as Aron explained: 'France in its abasement no longer satisfies their appetite for greatness.'[62] Realizing that France was no longer a power of the first rank, French intellectuals recognized that they were no longer playing to a global audience, at least not in the way they had been accustomed to during the decades leading up to the war. '[F]rom the moment that the French position ceases to have universal significance,' Aron intoned, 'intellectuals seek a position neither Russian nor American, in hopes of thus attaining to universality.'[63] Moreover, resigned to the apparent futility of striving for great-power parity, post-war French intellectuals maintained that 'attaining to universality' would henceforth be the work of history. Thinkers like Merleau-Ponty insisted that vast, irresistible currents of history, and not statesmen or technical specialists, were gathering themselves to sweep humanity into a glorious future. Under these conditions, history simply needed witnesses and heralds, not social scientists or statesmen.

From this perspective, Sartre and de Gaulle shared the same end, namely, finding a political position 'neither Russian nor American'. They differed, however, on the means. For de Gaulle, finding or creating such a space was the work of heroic individuals and superior statecraft, while for Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, finding or creating such a place was the work of history. De Gaulle and most post-war existentialists, then, bore at least this distant likeness: both believed that individuals found happiness and fulfillment, at least to some extent, in playing roles assigned by larger wholes. Both, in other words, believed that meaning and purpose demanded a collective will or personality strong enough to repress what de Maistre once called 'the aberrations of individual reason'.

But these 'aberrations' and not the collectivities from whence they came were precisely where Aron mined for meaning. In fact, as Allan Bloom observed: 'Aron lived - and in all probability would have died - defending this unnatural spiritual asceticism, one of the most arduous of all, namely, the one that consists in believing

in the rights of others to think as they please.'[64] This is not, as Bloom emphasized, the same thing as dying for God or one's country. It is, rather, the essence of the liberal conviction and it defined Aron to the core of his being.

This is why Aron was willing to accept a vastly more scaled-down understanding of grandeur than de Gaulle. 'We are under no illusions about the future,' Aron once declared. 'No spectacular or grandiose task opens up before us for the simple reason that neither conquest nor revolution are within the range of the possible.'[65] Although Aron maintained that democracy was capable of great moral accomplishment, he took equal pains to point out that moral progress was often slow and tortuously difficult. Reason 'does aim at a certain universality,' he declared, 'but that universality is defined by the enlargement of consciousness through the criticism of itself and its institutions.[66] Knowing full well that self-criticism is hardly a natural reflex, Aron recognized that democracy required a citizenry that could occasionally summon political qualities that bordered on the heroic, while despairing at times over the seeming inability of some countries - like France - to engage in the sort of disciplined soul-searching necessary to self-governance. ('The final question of the historical destiny of France is always the same,' Aron once glumly observed. 'How shall a people who rationalize their dreams and conceal their disabilities arrive at recognition of reality?')[67] For Aron, dreams and moral ambitions must always pass through the reality of constraining necessities: 'To live and think historically is to recognize the servitude of our condition and to work to enlarge, by action, the margin of our autonomy.'[68]

This last sentence brings us to the nub of the problem for Aron. Aron's ambivalence about the politics of grandeur reflects a deeper ambivalence over the origins and character of human freedom. Despite the senseless turmoil of the twentieth century, Aron once declared, he never ceased 'to think, or dream, or hope - in the light of the idea of Reason - for a humanized society'.[69] For Aron, as for Kant, a truly humanized society is one which recognizes the freedom of the individual to enhance his or her own moral worth under laws hypothetically of his or her own making. The universal reign of law and the establishment of perpetual peace thus constitute two representations of the Ideas as the goal of history and as the realization of a rational humanity.

What saved Aron from the revolutionary optimism of the Marxists - and the non-revolutionary optimism of nineteenth-century liberals such as Comte and Spencer, for that matter - was his unshakeable conviction that the idea of the end of history was just that, an *idea*. As an idea, the end of history is simply an assumption or working hypothesis which is necessary for history to make any sense at all. Transforming the end of history from a working hypothesis into a rational certainty is absurd, for doing so immediately destroys history. If the end of history becomes 'progressively necessary', Aron once explained, 'then history is definitely eliminated, since the present state could have been encompassed at one stroke by a powerful mind. [O]ur perspective would disappear ... and the science of the past would become useless at that moment when history would come to an end by being dissolved in suprahistorical truth.'[70] Because this eschatological perspective functions only as a regulatory ideal, the process by which history realizes its end must necessarily be represented as unachievable. A purely formal idea of the end of history, Aron wrote, 'will carry no conviction (and does not claim to do so) but at least suggests the basic antinomy between the rational mission of man and brute existence. History exists only because of this contradiction. Either pure mind or blind

impulse, it would be equally lost in a continuous state or a lawless sequence.'[71] History, then, requires an 'inaccessible paradise' in order to be possible.

As a practical matter, however, the problem with inaccessible paradises is their abstractness. Although Aron never wavered in his conviction that reason must respect the constraints of historical necessity, he never squared that conviction with his equally firm commitment to the autonomy of reason, a shortcoming that left him defending the logically obscure proposition that reason is at one and the same time independent of and conditioned by the forces of historical necessity. This is why Aron alternates between accepting and rejecting the politics of grandeur. On the one hand, in Aron's schema, freedom suggests that we must work 'to enlarge the margin of our autonomy' - which is certainly what de Gaulle attempted to do - while on the other hand, freedom seems to reside for Aron, in Henry Kissinger's suggestive phrase, 'in the inward recognition of limits'.

It is this conundrum, we suggest, more than changing historical circumstance, which accounts for Aron's 'restlessness'. Aron's critical philosophy of history invariably tends to dissolve all principled positions into more moderate positions which, upon closer inspection, are really little more than a series of unstable compromises. Given de Gaulle's temperament and convictions, it is no wonder he often became irritated with Aron. As he once noted rather dourly to André Malraux, 'Aron never was a Gaullist'. Indeed, at times, it was difficult to know exactly what Aron was. As Francois Furet noted: 'Of the small number who made their way to London in 1940, [Aron] remained the exception: he alone was not a Gaullist. After the war, however, he became one but not until de Gaulle had left power... An editorialist for *Figaro*, he spoke out against the war in Algeria. When de Gaulle returned to power, he offered only sustained critique.'[72]

The tensions in Aron's thought, however, should not be overdrawn. Although Aron was frequently bedeviled by what he took to be the fundamental antinomies of the human condition, he was clearly opposed to the totalitarian impulse and just as clearly committed to a politics of freedom. Even though he may have lost his footing from time to time as he struggled to reconcile competing principles in his own thinking - as de Gaulle was quick to notice - Aron never abandoned a politics of reason and understanding. Indeed, near the end of his life, de Gaulle referred to Aron as his '*cher maître*', a term of endearment as much as respect. Nevertheless, the gulf that separated them at times seems vast indeed. It is inconceivable that Aron would have ever spoken to France in the same spirit as de Gaulle did. 'A truce to doubts!' de Gaulle declared in words that could have almost been aimed directly at Aron:

> Pouring over the gulf into which the country has fallen, I am her son, calling her, holding the light for her, showing her the way of rescue. Many have joined me already. Others will come I am sure! I can hear France now, answering me. In the depths of the abyss she is rising up again, she is on the march, she is climbing the slope. Ah! Mother, such as we are, we are here to serve you.[73]

Although it is doubtful that Aron would have ever have issued such a trumpet blast, it is clear from his life's work that he in his own way most certainly heeded it.

Notes

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2. Cited in R. Colquhoun, *Raymond Aron: The Sociologist in Society* (London, 1986), 400.
3. See R. Aron, *Memoirs: Fifty Years of Political Reflection* (New York and London, 1990), 300. 'What led me to these perhaps excessive criticisms was the General's very style; and it is style that assured his success. Positive results could have been achieved without scandal, without exasperating our partners and allies.'
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5. R. Davis, *A Politics of Understanding: The International Thought of Raymond Aron* (Baton Rouge, 2010). The author thanks LSU Press for allowing the use of citations from the book for this article.
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9. *Ibid*., 16–17.
10. *Ibid*., 17.
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15. R. Aron, 'The Fifth Republic: Letter from Paris', *Encounter*, xi (1958), 12.
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33. T.B. Strong, 'History and Choices: The Foundations of the Political Thought of Raymond Aron', *History and Ideas: Studies in the Philosophy of History*, xi (1972), 191. As evidence of Aron's change of heart, Strong cites R. Aron, 'L'ideologie, support nécessaire de l'action', *Res Publica*, ii (1960).
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35. *Ibid*., 296–7.
36. Mahoney, *De Gaulle*, 137.
37. Aron, *Memoirs*, 298.
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39. *Ibid*., 297.
40. *Ibid*., 298.
41. *Ibid*., 298.
42. R. Aron, 'A New Member of the Nuclear Club', *Survival*, i (1959), 137.
43. *Ibid*., 137.
44. *Ibid*., 138.
45. R. Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Baker Fox (Garden City), 693.
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47. R. Aron, *The Great Debate*: *Theories of Nuclear Strategy*, trans. Ernest Pawel (Westport, 1981), 187.

48. Aron, *Peace and War*, 693.
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53. R. Aron, 'La France joue sa derneière chance en Afrique: IV. L'unité française en peril,' *Figaro*, xv (1955); cited in Colquhoun, *Raymond Aron: The Sociologist in Society*, 45.
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60. *Ibid*., 12.
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