Perspectives on Political Science

ISSN: 1045-7097 (Print) 1930-5478 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/vpps20

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To cite this article: Daniel J. Mahoney (2017) Friendship and the Solitude of Greatness: The Case of Charles de Gaulle , Perspectives on Political Science, 46:2, 87-92, DOI: 10.1080/10457097.2016.1252613

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10457097.2016.1252613

PERSPECTIVES ON POLITICAL SCIENCE
2017, VOL. 46, NO. 2, 87–92
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10457097.2016.1252613

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Friendship and the Solitude of Greatness: The Case of Charles de Gaulle

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ABSTRACT

The French statesman Charles de Gaulle was, and remains, something of an enigma. A genuinely great man, at first glance, he seems to tower above mere humanity. In studying de Gaulle's biographies and writings, the statesman and military man eclipses the human being without leaving his human bearing wholly behind. De Gaulle himself emphasized the solitude and sadness that accompanied the burden of human greatness. Yet de Gaulle, the self-described "man of character," "the born protector," was also a loving husband, a not terribly demanding or severe father, a faithful Christian, and a French patriot. There were profound limits to his solitude and self-sufficiency. His austere magnanimity coincided with moderation, even benevolence. He loved his country, strove for greatness, and sacrificed something of his private happiness for the public good. He was a complex man and soul, and perhaps a conflicted one.

A devoted family man, de Gaulle nonetheless was a man of few friendships. (I discuss the exceptions in the course of this presentation.) He was in no way an empty suit, a vacant soul. Still, he cultivated authority and prestige in no small part by remaining a mystery to those around him. What passions, thoughts, and feelings animated this enigmatic soul? This mystery cannot be completely dispelled, but it can be clarified with the help of de Gaulle's own self-presentation in *Le fil de l'epée* (*The Edge of the Sword*) and by attentiveness to key moments and episodes in his long and eventful life.

This tension between the public and the private, between greatness and the requirements of civility and affability, defines the figure we know as "de Gaulle." (De Gaulle had a curious habit of referring to himself in the third person as de Gaulle—as if the private man, the real man, was separate, even distant, from the public persona.) Perhaps only Washington rivals him for the austerity, the seeming inaccessibility, of the man behind the public persona. Here we confront two great statesmen and military leaders, two authentically great men, moved by love of country, love of liberty, and the requirements of personal greatness. They share a stoicism, a rectitude, that is all too rare in a democratic age.

Democratic man above all values authenticity, self-expression, and accessibilty. He appreciates people who are "nice." He is not supposed to wear a mask, to keep part of his inner self hidden from those around him. And yet, paradoxically, there is something vacuous about these constant "democratic" displays of the "true self," which must be shared with the whole of humanity. The "true self" is often empty of substance, of spiritual depth, frequently contenting itself with the trivial or the commonplace. Such democratic displays are the opposite of Gaullist grandeur, which is inseparable from a certain *hauteur*.

De Gaulle did not have a democratic soul, but his humane version of magnanimity is needed by democracies, particularly in times of crisis. De Gaulle and Churchill were not wholly shaped by a democratic age. But their "quasi-aristocratic" virtues helped save European liberty in its confrontation with totalitarianism in the twentieth century. In Churchill's unforgettable "Finest Hour" speech of June 18, 1940, and in de Gaulle's great "Appeal" to resistance of the same day, we confront powerful and eloquent appeals to personal and political honor at the service of helping to save a Western civilization that too often puts personal well-being above the old civic and military virtues. Churchill's and de Gaulle's contemporaries needed to be reminded of old truths (including the Roman virtue of courage) and the full range of the virtues.

One profoundly misunderstands de Gaulle if one sees in him an aspiring Bonaparte, a Caesarian figure threatening public liberties. He was quite critical (in *France et son*

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This article was originally presented as a paper on a panel, "Statesmanship and Friendship in an Age of Transformation," sponsored by the McConnell Center for Political Leadership, at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, September 2016, in Philadelphia, PA.

armée and elsewhere) of Bonaparte for severing greatness from moderation, for squelching public liberty, and for engaging in imperial overreach. De Gaulle was an egalitarian in two elemental senses: as a Christian he affirmed the dignity of man made in the "image and likeness of God" (and for this reason opposed every form of totalitarianism) and as a French republican, he accepted civic equality as the basis of free, republican life. But he did not accept what might be called a democratic political psychology that affirmed human equality in almost every respect. Even democracies need statesmen, however much democrats delight in attacking inequalities and hierarchies as inherently unjust. De Gaulle believed that nature, human nature above all, is stronger than democratic ideology. Like Aristotle and Machiavelli (for all their considerable differences), he knew that there were a variety of human types. As to the question of command, the world was forever divided between the "great" and the "small" (on this point, see Book 3 of the *Politics* and chapter 9 of the *Prince*). The great man must ally with the few or the many (or perhaps mediate their claims) and should not pretend that the human world is a homogenous or undifferentiated mass.

If men are "political animals," as de Gaulle asserts in *The Edge of the Sword*, they "feel the need for organization, that is to say for an established order and for leaders." This is not merely a matter of self-assertion on the part of the great as Machiavelli and Nietzsche might suggest. It is a matter of *justice* (as Aristotle suggests in his *Ethics*). A common or shared good is possible between the few and the many in a way that respects common decency, public liberty, and shared humanity. De Gaulle's great achievement as a statesman and political thinker was to meld together magnanimity and moderation, or rather to show that the truly great man was a "born protector" and not a tyrant and a destroyer of bodies and souls.

The key to de Gaulle's self-understanding, to his unforced melding of magnanimity and moderation, can be found in the two central sections of *The Edge of the Sword*, on "Character" and "Prestige," respectively. Let us turn to those two revealing discussions.

The Man of Character

De Gaulle's account of "the man of character" in part 2 of *The Edge of the Sword* (1932) is more than an account of "the virtue of hard times," as he calls it. It is nothing less than what André Malraux called an "anticipatory self-portrait." This anticipatory self-portrait allows us to see "de Gaulle" *avant la lettre* and thus to get a glimpse of the mysterious depths (as well as the self-understanding) that shaped his soul. De Gaulle's account of the "man of character" is at the same time an exacting self-portrait and an exercise in the political philosophy and political psychology (in the original, capacious sense of the term) that account for human greatness. Rarely has a statesman been so self-conscious about his own nature and motives and about the nature of the political whole (and the human world) in which he operates.

It is tempting—but mistaken—to give a Nietzschean interpretation of "the man of character." He is indeed an individualist who "has recourse to himself." One might think of him as a political artist who likes to act alone. "His instinctive response" to the challenge of events "is to leave his mark on action, to take responsibility for it, to make it his own business." His "passion for self-reliance" is "accompanied by some roughness in method." His subordinates initially groan under his command and are struck by his aloofness. The man of character knows that "there can be no authority without prestige, nor prestige" without personal distance. Hence, the austerity, the almost inhuman roughness, distance, and reserve that initially characterizes the man of character. It is hard to see how one can reconcile such a view of human greatness with an Aristotelian or Christian conception of a common or shared human and political good. But this is not the end of the story.

De Gaulle writes that "when events become grave, the peril pressing" things begin to change and ordinary men turn to the man of character "as iron towards the magnet." The confidence of the "lesser man" ("petits") exalts the man of character…and gives him a sense of obligation." He is no longer so solitary, so autarchic. He is moved by benevolence "for he is a born protector." The desire to protect, to give of himself, is deeply ingrained in his nature. In other words, his soul is moved by generosity and not by the impulse to destroy or tear down in search of a field for his political ambition. He is a benevolent political animal in a community that he acknowledges as his own. He does not claim all success as his own, even as he alone takes responsibility for failures. As I have argued in my book *De Gaulle: Statesmanship, Grandeur, and Modern Democracy* de Gaulle's is an account of magnanimity marked by a Christian sense of benevolence and a classical appreciation of greatness of soul. Aristotle's magnanimous man does not display the same sense of obligation or generosity as de Gaulle's man of character even if his pride prevents him from committing injustice. He is virtuous but he does not remember the good deeds of others. He is haughty, even contemptuous of lesser souls. He is not prone to admiration "since nothing is great to him" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1125a, 2–3).

By contrast, de Gaulle's sense of personal and political greatness is profoundly marked by Christianity, by a deepening and a broadening of the soul's obligations to others. De Gaulle even calls the man of character the "good prince," a sure sign that the great French statesman had more than military greatness in mind when he

published *The Edge of the Sword* in 1932. Just as a knight is moved by chivalry, by a mixture of aristocratic virtue and Christian obligation, de Gaulle's man of character eschews revenge and absorbs himself in salutary action for the common good. He is part of a moral and political whole. De Gaulle explicitly states that "justice appears" when the man of character is given his due.

De Gaulle's man of character does not inhabit a Nietzschean world "beyond good and evil." Nonetheless, in the chapter on "Prestige" de Gaulle freely acknowledges the tension between Christianity and the political virtues. "The perfection preached in the Gospels does not lead to empire. Every man of action has a strong dose of egotism, pride, hardness, and cunning." De Gaulle's "hardness" was most on display in his decision in 1962 to abandon the Harkis, the Algerian Muslims who had fought courageously for France in the Algerian War, to their terrible fate (in many cases, imprisonment, torture, and death). De Gaulle undoubtedly wanted to bring the Algerian War to a quick end and to restore comity to France. But this abandonment of France's allies leaves a stain on the record of a man otherwise admirably devoted to national and personal honor. Still, de Gaulle's conception of the statesman as "born protector" surely owes as much to Christianity as to pagan antiquity. At the same time, the discussions of leadership in *The Edge of the Sword* undoubtedly express unresolved tensions in de Gaulle's complex soul.

Aloofness and the Melancholy of Superior Men

In the chapter on "Prestige," de Gaulle acknowledges a crisis of authority in the modern world. A statesman can no longer depend on the force of tradition or inherited institutions. In some profound sense, the old gods are dead, or are at least tottering. De Gaulle was fully cognizant of what Walter Lippmann in 1929 called "the acids of modernity," three years before de Gaulle published his little book. Authority needs the support of artifice and that means the cultivation of mystery, reserve, and aloofness on the part of a great military or political leader. De Gaulle recognizes that this is a very special burden, too much for many to bear. It demands "unceasing self-discipline, the constant taking of risks, and a perpetual inner struggle." Some great men buckle under these weights and withdraw from the austere demands of public life. The man of "reserve, character, and greatness" … "must accept the solitude which, according to Faguet, is the 'wretchedness of superior men.'" Tranquility, and even friendship, certainly of the usual kind, are denied the man of character. An inchoate sense of melancholy surrounds him. De Gaulle reports a tale of somebody saying to Napoleon that an old and noble monument was sad. Napoleon's reply was revealing: "Yes as sad as greatness."

Is this de Gaulle's final word? Must the "born protector" choose a solitary life without family and friends? Is there an unbridgeable gap between the requirements of greatness and the requirements of human happiness? Or does de Gaulle exaggerate to make a point about the sacrifice of ordinary tranquility that sometimes accompanies personal and political greatness? In what ways did this particular man of character remain a human being, capable of tenderness, friendship, even Christian charity?

A Family Man

Before turning to the place of friendship in de Gaulle's public and personal life, it is necessary to say a word or two about the place of family in his affective life. Here his humanity is most clearly on display. His biographers, such as Jean Lacouture and Jonathan Fenby, reveal a loving husband and father, a Catholic bourgeois who valued family ties and affections. He was in no way autarchic, self-sufficient, or anything resembling a god among men. He was a great man, but very much a human being. His letters to his wife Yvonne are often affectionate and reveal nothing of a stern or uncaring *paterfamilias*. Theirs was a tie marked by love, affection, as well as duty and responsibility. Even during the Free French years in London, de Gaulle had time for his family amidst his grave political and military responsibilities. He was proud of his son Philippe's service in the Free French navy (he went on later in life to become an admiral) and wrote Philippe an affectionate letter to that effect. In his letters, he was always "papa" or "affectionate papa," and if he was not conspicuous with affection in person, neither was he cold and stern with his children. (Lacouture records a tender grandfather at Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises during the final years of his retirement, who enjoyed taking walks with his grandchildren Anne Boissieu and Yves de Gaulle, Philippe's second son.) He even laughed on occasions. The country writer, as Lacouture calls him (he was completing his *Memoirs of Hope*), and tender grandfather, is eminently human and humane and is in no way of another essence.

The Exemplary Christian

He had a special relationship, one marked by deep and abiding love, for his daughter Anne, who was born on New Year's Day 1928 with Down syndrome. She was to live twenty years and is buried at Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises with Charles and Yvonne de Gaulle. She brought out the best in de Gaulle as father, husband, and Christian. Fenby and Lacouture describe de Gaulle's enormous devotion to Anne: the only word the girl managed to say properly was "papa." He played with her after returning from work, kissing her, singing songs, and allowing her to play with his military cap. He would take her for walks in the

botanical gardens in Metz before World War II and would rock her gently for an hour or two at a time before she fell asleep. The little girl loved him in her one way.

The Catholic writer Henri-Daniel Rops, a friend of de Gaulle's before the war, reports a moving discussion he had with de Gaulle in which he confided the "heavy cross" that he and his wife had to bear because of Anne's unfortunate condition. But they never thought for a moment to put Anne in an institution. As Fenby points out, de Gaulle's character may have been decidedly stoic, but with Anne he found a "blessing" and his "joy." This same man who went to mass at a French church in London everyday during the war, responded like a Christian who paradoxically found joy in his suffering and in the love it brought forth for Anne. As Lacouture reports, his friend, the Catholic writer André Frossard, observed that there was more love in the world because of Anne. De Gaulle welcomed the trial of Anne's diminished condition and suffering also as a gift that encouraged him "always to aim higher" (as he once was overheard saying by one of her doctors). He famously remarked upon her death that "now she is like all the others." It is hard not to see grace at work in this loving encounter between a wounded child and her loving father. In de Gaulle we see no Nietzschean contempt for the weak, the disabled, the suffering. The "man of character" is indeed a "born protector," and in this case even an exemplary Christian.

A Paucity of Friendships

If de Gaulle was surrounded by a loving family, if great joy arose even from the "trial" that was Anne's life, it cannot be said that his was a life rich in friendship. Fenby reports that in Trier in Germany, where he was stationed in the late 1920s, he stayed after work to fraternize with his young junior officers. He discussed history with them. Nothing personal, nothing intimate. He stood apart, both because of his height and because of his self-command (which Fenby falsely reduces to "ego"). One witness to these encounters observed de Gaulle's "extraordinary loneliness." This observer asked, "Beyond his excursions into history, what could the [then} major say? Who could he talk to? What about?" "The man of character," it appears, does not converse about commonplaces. Like Aristotle's "magnanimous man," he preoccupies himself with high and noble things and perhaps even his own deeds. He is difficult to bear and somewhat "rough in his methods." His greatness undoubtedly sets him apart. Solitude is part of his condition, even if, as we have shown, it is not the only or final word.

But what about friendship with other statesman, with those rare few imbued with a sense of human and political greatness? For all their disagreements in the course of the war, for all his sense that Churchill and England had taken advantage of "wounded France," de Gaulle clearly admired Churchill. In the famous description in volume 1 of the *Mémoires de guerre*, Churchill appeared to de Gaulle "from one end of the drama to the other, as the great champion of a great enterprise and the great artist of a great history." There could not be higher praise from de Gaulle. He brilliantly describes Churchill's unparalleled ability to "play upon" the "angelic and diabolical gift" of politics and political rhetoric "to rouse the heavy dough of the English as well as to impress the minds of foreigners." Churchill was "a man of destiny" (in his own words), or in Gaullist terms, "a man of character." Churchill and de Gaulle never became friends, at least in the fulsome sense of the term, but they admired each other and never allowed frictions in the relationship between their two nations (or between Free France and Britain) to ultimately undermine that mutual respect and admiration.

Could a relationship between two magnanimous men, two great "men of character" ever be free of friction and misunderstanding? That seems unlikely. The historian François Kersaudy has told the story well. One of the first things de Gaulle did upon returning to power in 1958 was to invite a very old Churchill to Paris to be honored by the French government and nation. And from Churchill's own death in 1965 until de Gaulle's in November 1970, de Gaulle wrote Clementine Churchill every January on the anniversary of Churchill's death. Unlike Aristotle's magnanimous man, de Gaulle had a gift for seeing greatness in others. He was capable of genuine admiration. As a Conservative in the best sense of the term, he appreciated what Churchill had done to protect Europe and the West against the scourge of totalitarianism. Both men never severed greatness from moderation or lost an appreciation for the dignity of what de Gaulle freely called "les petits," those with no aptitude for leadership or command. Churchill and de Gaulle are best understood as "shepherds," born protectors, who were never tempted to become totalitarian "wolves."

Malraux, the "Inspired Friend"

There was one public man whom de Gaulle called his "inspired friend." In a luminous passage in his *Memoirs of Hope*, he speaks of André Malraux, always sitting to his right, an "inspired friend" and "devotee of lofty destinies." Malraux, the great novelist, adventurer, theorist of art, and longtime Gaullist Minister of Culture, gave de Gaulle "a sense of being insured against the commonplace." Malraux's own sense of greatness fortified de Gaulle and his "flashing judgments would help to dispel the shadows." De Gaulle had often expressed friendship and esteem for Malraux. But Malraux feared that he

primarily saw him as a symbol who lent intellectual credence to Gaullism. Malraux thus doubted if the General truly thought of him as his friend, as his equal. Nonetheless, Lacouture reports that Malraux was elated to read this passage in de Gaulle's final set of memoirs and "dashed off at once" to read the passage aloud to his friend, the great antitotalitarian writer Manès Sperber. It must also be recognized that de Gaulle bestowed his final intellectual testament to Malraux, recorded in that great dialogue between the poet and the statesman that is *Les chênes qu'on abat*, *Felled Oaks*. Here, de Gaulle expresses his deep concerns about "the crisis of civilization," if not his final despair about France and his legacy. He feared that he amused his fellow countrymen by waving flags, as he puts it in a particularly pointed formulation. It is a recreated encounter or conversation, but one "based on profound truth" as Lacouture rightly observes.

De Gaulle and Malraux were not intimates. But a lofty vision of France and civilization united them, as well as a refusal to rest content with the commonplace. Theirs was a friendship marked by a common dedication to a "politics of grandeur" and a shared sense of de Gaulle's own indispensability to France and the West. De Gaulle does not use the word "friend" lightly. We must then respect his judgment about Malraux as revealing an essential truth.

Adenauer and de Gaulle: A Great Political Friendship

There is one statesman whom de Gaulle called his "illustrious friend," Konrad Adenauer, the chancellor of West Germany between 1949 and 1963. The two men met in France and Germany fifteen times between de Gaulle's return to power in 1958 and Adenauer's departure from office in 1963. They also corresponded on more than forty occasions. They came to admire each other and developed a personal friendship that accompanied and helped deepen the political and spiritual reconciliation of France and Germany in the period between 1958 and 1963. As François Kersaudy has noted, de Gaulle admired Adenauer for his intransigent opposition to Hitler and National Socialism before and during World War II and for the independence he displayed in dealing with the British occupation forces in Germany after 1945. In Adenauer, de Gaulle saw a man of immense personal integrity, a German patriot (but not a deranged nationalist), and a statesman of the first order. Adenauer was at first suspicious of de Gaulle, fearing that he was a virulent nationalist who opposed European integration and who was insensitive to the Soviet threat. His first encounter with de Gaulle at Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises cured him of any misgivings. De Gaulle's nationalism was much more moderate and humane than Adenauer had anticipated. The two great men saw eye to eye on the key issues of the day and both were firmly committed to an enduring rapprochement between France and Germany.

Adenauer was profoundly touched by the fact that he was welcomed at de Gaulle's home in the fall of 1958 as a member of his family and was struck by the simplicity—and naturalness—of de Gaulle's manners and personal bearing. The two men developed an authentic friendship that was sometime clouded by differences on geopolitical matters (de Gaulle was suspicious of what he saw as West Germany's excessive deference to American leadership, and Adenauer was worried, wrongly in retrospect, that France was indifferent to the Soviet threat to Berlin). But these bumps in the road never lead to anything like a break or an undermining of the mutual respect in which each statesman held the other. Kersaudy goes so far as to say that a "great friendship" developed between these two remarkable statesmen in the years between 1958 and 1963. Adenauer came to France on a state visit in July 1962 where de Gaulle welcomed him as a great German, a great European, and a true friend of France. Two months later, de Gaulle traveled to Germany where he was met by rapturous crowds and where he delivered fourteen sterling speeches in exquisite German. He displayed what Kersaudy aptly calls the "Gaullist magic." Of course, the capstone of Franco-German reconciliation was the signing of a treaty of friendship between the two nations in the summer of 1962, a reconciliation that was symbolized by these two Catholic statesmen coming together for prayer in the cathedral of Rheims, a city much contested in previous Franco-German wars and conflicts. Kersaudy notes that Adenauer was a cold man, and de Gaulle an eminently proud one. Yet both believed that the "deeds of friendship," both personal and national, could in this case replace the "miseries of war," as de Gaulle strikingly put in in his *Memoirs of Hope*.

Adenauer died on April 19, 1967, not without a touch of sadness as he confronted the isolations of extreme old age and the loss of political responsibilities. But, as Kersaudy notes, he told de Gaulle four years earlier that "the personal friendship" between the two men was "one of the very rare presents" that he took away from political work. For his part, de Gaulle told aides that Adenauer was the "only one that I am able to consider as my equal." Churchill's powers and influence were by now long eclipsed (he died at the age of ninety in January 1965). He was alive but no longer on the world stage. And political—and national—differences (particularly regarding the centrality of the partnership with the United States) prevented their mutual admiration from being transformed into sustained personal friendship. However, with Adenauer and de Gaulle, we see how two world-class statesmen—committed in their own ways to

humane national loyalty, opposed to every form of totalitarian domination, and deeply devoted to the Christian sources of the European spirit—could bury the past to build a future on new and more solid foundations. Along the way, a personal friendship developed between two proud if eminently decent and humane men.

Conclusion

We have explored the complexity of Charles de Gaulle's soul and self-understanding. His "anticipatory self-portrait" in *The Edge of the Sword* allows us to see how benevolence and solitude coexisted in this great man's soul. This "born protector" was not a Nietzschean "Overman." He loved his family, cared deeply for his country, and felt a sense of obligation toward those who looked to his protective leadership. A Christian and a man of honor, he believed in justice and the common good and did not act as if "God is dead." He was a loving husband and father, and his deliberately cultivated austere public persona did not crowd out human feelings and even tenderness. In dealing with his beloved daughter Anne, he suffered like a true Christian, and even found joy and consolation amidst a great trial. He was a man of few friendships and does not seem to have experienced the kind of virtue-friendship, the joint perception of the good (*sunaisthesis*), that Aristotle describes in the ninth book of his *Ethics*. De Gaulle knew that in an age where character depended on the cultivation of "prestige," some sacrifice of human intimacy must be made by the "man of character." He also knew that this sacrifice was for the common good. He undoubtedly felt sadness and loneliness, but also love, affection, tenderness, and pride for self and country. His friendships with Malraux and Adenauer are particularly telling. De Gaulle was an authentically great human being, not just a "charismatic leader" to use the desiccated language of our official social science, which can no longer talk about the highest human types, or about any souls for that matter.

Acknowledgments

I thank Andrew Bibby and Richard Avramenko for their comments.

Sources and Suggested Readings

I have drawn freely on sections two and three ("Character" and "Prestige") of Charles de Gaulle's *The Edge of the Sword*, translated by Gerald Hopkins (New York, NY: Criterion Books, 1960), 35–78, especially 41–44 and 55–66. This elegant but inexact translation should be checked against the French original, *Le fil de l'epée et autres ecrits* (Paris, France: Omnibus/Plon, 1994). For example, on page 44 of the English translation, the crucial phrase "bon prince" ("good prince") disappears.

For a fuller discussion of de Gaulle's portrait of "the man of character," see Daniel J. Mahoney, *De Gaulle: Statesmanship, Grandeur, and Modern Democracy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000), 41–66.

On de Gaulle's family life and the relationship with Anne de Gaulle, see Jonathan Fenby, *The General: Charles de Gaulle and the France He Saved* (New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2012), 89–91 and 159–65 and Jean Lacouture, *De Gaulle: The Rebel: 1890–1944*, translated by Patrick O'Brian (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1990), 107 and *De Gaulle: The Ruler: 1945–1970*, translated by Patrick O'Brian (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1992), 578.

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For the beautiful passage on Malraux, see Charles de Gaulle, *Memoirs of Hope: Renewal and Endeavor*, translated by Terence Kilmartin (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1971), 272. For Malraux's reaction to this passage, see Lacouture, *De Gaulle: The Ruler: 1945–1970*, 584. For the great final conversation between de Gaulle and Malraux, see Malraux, *Felled Oaks: Conversation with de Gaulle* (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972) and the discussion in Lacouture, 584.

See pages 173–81 of the *Memoirs of Hope* for de Gaulle's own account of his emerging friendship with Konrad Adenauer. The phrase "illustrious friend" is used on page 181. I am indebted to François Kersaudy's excellent article "De Gaulle et Adenauer, aux origines de la réconciliation Franco-Allemande" on the website of the Institut Charles de Gaulle.