



Hit the Road, Jacques...

Raymond Kuhn

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Review Article

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L'Irresponsable

GATTEGNO, H.
Paris, Stock, 2006
312 pp., 18.50 €, ISBN 2 234 05854 6

La Tragédie du président

GIESBERT, F.-O.
Paris, Flammarion, 2006
416 pp., 20 €, ISBN 2 08 068948 7

Le Pouvoir et la vie: choisir

GISCARD D'ESTAING, V.
Paris, Cie 12, 2006
560 pp., 21.90 €, ISBN 2 903866 84 8

Accusé Chirac, levez-vous

JEAMBAR, D.
Paris, Seuil, 2006
146 pp., 6 €, ISBN 2 02 086480 0

In predictable fashion, the long run-up to the 2007 presidential election saw the publication of a host of books related to France's political situation, from analyses of the apparent failures of the 'French model'¹ to biographies of the two main contenders for the Élysée. Bookshelves groaned as tomes on how to reverse France's socio-economic decline jostled for space with intimate portrayals of the political careers and personal lives of Nicolas Sarkozy and Ségolène Royal.² Although all these books looked

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in the rearview mirror, by including a historical analysis of alleged national decline or covering in detail the political track record of ‘Ségo’ and ‘Sarko’, what they also had in common was their future-oriented focus. These were essentially forward-looking works, designed to inform their readers about possible policy solutions to France’s myriad problems or to present an insight into the personality, values and aspirations of the next President of the Republic. Albeit in very different ways, therefore, the aim of these books was to make a contribution to the campaign debate regarding the direction the country might take under its newly elected head of state.

Alongside these works could be found a very different body of political writing, which preferred to concentrate solely on the past and in particular the political legacy of the outgoing President, Jacques Chirac. Of the four books reviewed here, two (those of Hervé Gattegno and Denis Jeambar) focus on Chirac’s 12 years at the Élysée; one (by Franz-Olivier Giesbert) adopts a longer time frame of 20 years for its evaluation of Chirac’s political career both in and out of office; while in the fourth work (that of Valéry Giscard d’Estaing) Chirac is one of the principal characters in the unfolding drama which ends in the author’s defeat by François Mitterrand at the second ballot of the 1981 presidential election. Following Chirac’s decision not to stand in the 2007 presidential contest, these four books—three by political journalists and one by a politician—can be seen as contributions to what has already become a burgeoning *fin de règne* body of literature on ‘la Chiraquie’.

Given the length of Chirac’s political career, there is certainly much to look back on. A graduate of the Political Science Institute in Paris (where he first met his wife, Bernadette) and then of the prestigious training school for top civil servants, ENA, Chirac was a protégé of Georges Pompidou, who nicknamed him ‘le bulldozer’ in recognition of his ferocious energy. Already a government minister in the late 1960s, Chirac was appointed Prime Minister by the incoming President, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, in 1974, when Tony Blair was still an undergraduate at Oxford and Richard Nixon had yet to make his ignominious exit from the White House. Two years later Chirac resigned from the premiership in spectacular fashion to concentrate on the transformation of the Gaullist party into an electoral machine to serve his own presidential career ambitions. Between 1976 and 1981 the renamed party—le Rassemblement pour la République (RPR)—became a major thorn in the side of the Giscardian presidency, formally remaining part of the parliamentary coalition which supported Raymond Barre’s government, but at the same time taking every opportunity to mount critical assaults on its legislative programme.

This continuous sniping from within the governing right-wing coalition is a leitmotiv of the third volume of Giscard d’Estaing’s memoirs, *Le Pouvoir et la vie: choisir*. In the second part of the book, which focuses on the run-up to the 1981 presidential election and the campaign proper, the destabilising contribution of Chirac’s first presidential candidacy on the author’s attempt to gain re-election is highlighted. Seven years previously, Chirac had helped secure Giscard d’Estaing’s election to the presidency by leading a group of Gaullist deputies to support him at the

first ballot in opposition to the official Gaullist candidate, Jacques Chaban-Delmas. By 1981, however, Chirac's ambition to dominate the right wing of the French political spectrum now required that Giscard d'Estaing be defeated. The author seeks to convey a sense of surprise that his former Prime Minister might be involved in actively pursuing this objective—'L'autre hypothèse serait qu'il [Chirac] cherche le moyen de contribuer à mon échec. J'ai du mal à le croire' (p. 342). It is only after the disappointing result of the first ballot that Giscard d'Estaing puts the hypothesis to the test. Pretending to be an ordinary member of the RPR, he phones the headquarters of the Chirac campaign, putting a handkerchief over the mouthpiece to disguise his voice. Inquiring how he should vote at the second ballot, he is told in no uncertain terms that he should cast his vote for Mitterrand (pp. 466–467). The rest, as they say, is history. Giscard d'Estaing would never again exercise the supreme office, while Chirac, having achieved his tactical objective of eliminating a key rival, would have to wait another 14 years before seeing the realisation of his strategic goal.

Chirac's second term as Prime Minister, this time as head of a cohabitation government during the Mitterrand presidency, is the chronological starting point for Giesbert's book, which is a collection of 68 short chapters—'scenes of political life'—relating to the period between 1986 and 2006. This is an intimate account offered by the director of the weekly news magazine *Le Point*, based on notes taken from conversations between Chirac and the author over a prolonged period of time. As Giesbert remarks in the preface, this is not a biography of Chirac but rather 'l'histoire d'une tragédie personnelle, devenue, sur la fin, une tragédie nationale' (p. 9). Although the book paints a not unsympathetic portrait of Chirac personally, it also presents a severe condemnation of him as a politician and in particular as President. The book covers the public aspects of Chirac's career, such as the ferocious rivalry with Edouard Balladur after 1993, which culminated in Chirac winning the presidency at the third attempt in 1995, but which also had such damaging effects on relations within the right, including those between Chirac and one of Balladur's leading supporters, Sarkozy. The most interesting parts of Giesbert's book, however, are those where the author engages in character assassination. Chirac's lack of loyalty to friends and supporters, his opportunism, his lack of a coherent reformist vision and his bouts of indecision at key moments of crisis are laid out for all to see. Even the President's gargantuan appetite—a metaphor for his political ambition—is deemed worthy of a separate chapter. By the end of the book Chirac is laid bare, an emperor without clothes, as much to be pitied as reviled and a lonely figure immured in the *Élysée*.

Gattegno's book is more focused than Giesbert's, concentrating on a particular aspect of Chirac's presidential tenure: his immersion in a variety of financial scandals. For the author, who works as a journalist for *Le Monde*, Chirac is already under the spectre of scandal long before he enters the *Élysée*—he has been under suspicion throughout his long tenure of the mayorship of Paris. Gattegno's account covers the judicial investigations into the President's financial dealings and the role of the media, including his own newspaper, in their exposure. Gattegno's aim, however, is less moral condemnation than political analysis. For the author, Chirac has weakened the office

and reputation of the presidency. As a result, Gattegno contends, under Chirac a certain presidential practice, a mix of absolutism and irresponsibility, has come to an end (p. 20).

Jeambar's short book, *Accusé Chirac, levez-vous*, sets out the prosecution case on Chirac's wasted years at the Élysée. The book consists of seven thematic chapters which focus on a particular aspect of presidential (in)activity. While here too reference is made to Chirac's involvement in financial scandal, Jeambar also insists on the political failures of the presidency, the sorry socio-economic record, notably on the issue of unemployment, and France's inability to exert influence in global fora. This is a varied charge-sheet, with virtually nothing being put forward by the author as a plea in mitigation. Even Chirac's opposition to the war in Iraq is criticised for undermining the unity of the Atlantic Alliance and fostering division in Europe. Jeambar paints a picture of Chirac as a man of the past, trapped in an outdated way of looking at France's position in the world, while constantly changing tack in an opportunistic fashion to gain tactical advantage over his political rivals at home.

Although they differ in content, style and length, the books by Giesbert, Gattegno and Jeambar agree in their highly critical assessment of Chirac's tenure of the presidential office. For Giesbert, Chirac represents the embodiment of national decline, an evaluation with which Jeambar agrees: 'Son oeuvre porte un nom: le déclin français' (p. 13). For Gattegno it is Chirac's political and judicial irresponsibility which is of greatest concern. For all three authors Chirac has been a lame-duck president since the failure of the 2005 referendum on the EU constitution. Since then, his presidency has been on a steep downward slope: the failure of the Paris Olympic bid, the minor stroke which required his hospitalisation, the muddy waters of the Clearstream affair, the violence in the *cités*, the disastrous attempt to introduce the 'contrat première embauche' by Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin (who is vilified as vain and self-seeking in Giesbert's account) and the ongoing troubled relationship with Sarkozy, who Chirac was unable to prevent taking over the leadership of the successor to the RPR, l'Union pour le Mouvement Populaire, and subsequently being crowned the party's candidate for the 2007 presidential election.

The British politician Enoch Powell famously remarked that all political careers end in failure and Chirac's looks to be no exception to the rule. He was a politician who desperately wanted to be President, but did not seem to know what to do with the office once he had won it. On two occasions during his presidency he could have resigned: after the failed parliamentary dissolution in 1997, which ushered in the long period of cohabitation with the Jospin-led government of the plural left, and again in 2005 after the humiliating result of the EU constitutional referendum. Depending on one's point of view, his refusal to vacate the Élysée in the face of electoral rejection illustrated either his tenacity or his desperation. Now out of the top job, Chirac has three political goals. The first is to ensure that the withdrawal of his presidential immunity will not lead to any Juppé-style involvement in legal proceedings regarding allegations of financial wrongdoing. The second is to put a positive spin on his time in office. Helped by his daughter and communication adviser, Claude, this exercise began

well before the handover of power to his successor. Like Mitterrand before him, Chirac used the services of the journalist Pierre Péan to put across his version of events and to try to save what is left of his reputation.³ The final goal is to find another public role—perhaps in a European or international forum—to occupy his last years. It is highly unlikely that ‘le bulldozer’ will settle for the quiet life of retirement.

Notes

- [1] See, for example, Julliard (2005), Lefebvre & Méda (2006) and Bavarez (2006).
[2] The following are just a few of the many biographies and ‘intimate’ portrayals of Sarkozy and Royal which have appeared in recent years: for Sarkozy, Mantoux (2003); Domenach (2004); Noir (2005); Emmanuel (2006); Nay (2006); and for Royal, Bernard (2005); Cassandre (2006); Malouines & Meeus (2006).
[3] See Péan (1994, 2007).

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