



# The European Legacy

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## Monsieur Le Président De La République: France under De Gaulle, Chirac, and Sarkozy

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## Reviews

### Monsieur Le Président De La République: France under De Gaulle, Chirac, and Sarkozy

*Chaque pas doit être un but, Mémoires*, Tome 1. Par Jacques Chirac (Paris: Nil Éditions et Fondation Chirac, 2009), 503 pp. 29 Euros.

*De Gaulle-Malraux, une histoire d'amour*. Par Christine Clerc (Paris: Nil Éditions, 2008), 389 pp. 21 Euros.

*Sarkozy. Corps et âme d'un président*. Par Olivier Mongin and Georges Vigarello (Paris: Éditions Perrin, 2008), 104 pp. 9.80 Euros.

YVES LABERGE

Countless books have been published about French presidents; among those sent to us, the three titles above, each about one specific leader, are quite different in approach, style, and format. We have the autobiography of President Jacques Chirac, who was president in the years 1995–2002 and 2002–7, “*Chaque pas doit être un but, Mémoires*,” an essay by Olivier Mongin and Georges Vigarello on the incumbent president, Nicolas Sarkozy, *Sarkozy: Corps et âme d'un président*, and also a partial biography by Christine Clerc focusing on the friendship between President De Gaulle and his Minister of Culture André Malraux, *De Gaulle-Malraux, une histoire d'amour*. Each book will be presented separately; even though none of these books was meant to discuss foreign policies, my comments will mainly deal with passages or chapters related to international issues.

CHARLES DE GAULLE

Christine Clerc's book does not focus only on the early years of the still ongoing Fifth

Republic during which Charles de Gaulle (1890–1970) was at the Palais de l'Élysée; her story begins in World War II when De Gaulle and novelist André Malraux (1901–76) met for the first time, in 1945. Both men were quite different in their lifestyles and visions: De Gaulle was obviously a right-wing army leader and national hero of the French *Résistance*, while André Malraux was a leftist writer and adventurer who had fought against Franco in Spain in 1937 (where he also shot his unique film, *L'Espoir*). However, despite their personalities being almost worlds apart, both men understood each other perfectly well and respected each other, probably because they were both war heroes and part of the *Résistance* (244). Moreover, when Malraux became De Gaulle's minister of culture in 1959, they cooperated and worked well as a pair, so much so that each of them could often guess how the other would act, react, or reply in various situations (224).

Beyond the obvious friendship retold in this book, we can appreciate the impressions of both men during their diplomatic trips abroad; thus, for example, in their trip to India in 1958 Malraux admired and cherished Gandhi's heroic figure and was fascinated by Asian art and culture (226). When he met with India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (without De Gaulle), they discussed art, literature, and the explosive situation in Algeria. Malraux predicted that De Gaulle would bring an end to the conflict in Algeria; when Nehru asked about the role of the Communists in the negotiations, Malraux answered that it was negligible in Algeria but important in Paris, which meant that this party's role was not really effective but rather had

symbolic value with regard to French public opinion in the late 1950s (227). Throughout his life, Malraux was devoted to the world of art and as a recognized novelist had won the prestigious Prix Goncourt in 1933 for his third novel, *La Condition humaine* [The human condition]. Many stories depict him as such; in countless anecdotes he is romanticized because he often behaved like a heroic character and expressed himself in resolute formulas and poetic sentences. De Gaulle himself is also depicted as a great communicator, almost a *cabotin*: one day in Algeria in June 1958, he delivered to the crowd his famous line: “*Je vous ai compris*” [I understand you], which always created a cheerful reaction because both sides believed they were on the same wavelength (205).

But perhaps the most fascinating passages of *De Gaulle-Malraux, une histoire d'amour* are about the relationship between Malraux and the Kennedys. In 1961 Jackie and John Kennedy were invited by De Gaulle and Malraux for a gala dinner in the Château de Versailles. But the most astonishing event occurred two years later, when in 1963, as a symbolic gesture to thank the United States for their help in World War II, the French minister of culture agreed for the first time in history to have the most famous painting in the world—*The Mona Lisa*—to be exhibited abroad (245). It was seen by thousands of former G.I.s, senators, and millionaires, for which reason this act remains “the most important celebration of friendship between France and the USA” (247).

Other moments and military conflicts, like the wars in Indochina and Algeria, only confirm that De Gaulle and Malraux were on the same wavelength regarding governance and international affairs. Only one exception remained: the unity of Europe, in which Malraux never believed (181). Nevertheless, Malraux stepped down from office in 1969, one day after Pompidou replaced De Gaulle as the new president of France (320). After so many years together, he could not imagine himself continuing his life in politics without De Gaulle at his side (320).

### JACQUES CHIRAC

The much awaited autobiography of Jacques Chirac, *Chaque pas doit être un but*, is a very

detailed account of his life as a politician, as suggested by the literal meaning of the title—“each step must be a goal.” In the course of his long career, Jacques Chirac was not “just” the President of France; he also served as prime minister (as early as 1974) for short terms, as well as the mayor of Paris from 1977 to 1995 (236). In his top position at the Hôtel de Ville de Paris, he had the opportunity to meet all official guests and heads of state who were invited by the French government (264).

In Chirac’s memoir a whole chapter is dedicated to French foreign policy. Such chapters are interesting for historians and scholars in international relations because they can sometimes disclose confidences about political leaders that are not to be found in other autobiographies or memoirs. In chapter 21, Chirac explains his philosophy in terms of dialogue and openness, even with the most irresponsible and recalcitrant countries like Iran (349). In an interesting example of the numerous steps and levels in negotiations between two countries, he reveals that in 1986, when he was prime minister, a secret meeting took place outside France between a French diplomat and an Iranian minister in an attempt to normalize relations between the two countries and even establish some kind of military cooperation, which later failed to materialize (350). Many pages are also dedicated to Margaret Thatcher: Chirac admired her persuasive skills and recalls his perception that three European countries—England, France, and Germany—all too often contributed financially to virtually every member of the European Community, as for example in policies related to agriculture (362). According to him, in 1987 Thatcher thought President Ronald Reagan was “intellectually and physically unable to negotiate with the Soviets the issues related to nuclear security” (369).

This book is only the first volume of Chirac’s memoir; the narration ends in 1995 when at last Jacques Chirac became President of France; a follow-up appeared in May 2011.

### PRESIDENT NICOLAS SARKOZY

The shortest of the three titles reviewed here, the essay by Olivier Mongin and Georges Vigarello, *Sarkozy. Corps et âme d'un président*

[The body and soul of a president], is one of the many books written *against* Président Sarkozy. The authors study and criticize three dimensions: the public image of the president and the construction of his character; some portions of his personal success story; his frequent appearances in the French media and even on CBS (when, for example, he left the studio in the middle of an interview with Lesley Stahl who kept asking about his private life while ignoring any issues related to world politics) (73). Like many politicians, this young President, still in his fifties, is proud to be successful and displays his achievements like a national hero (as, for example, following the political and humanitarian crisis, the French hostages kept in Chad returned home unharmed) (73).

In their book, Georges Vigarello, historian at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* in Paris, and Olivier Mongin, journalist and editor of *Esprit*, juxtapose two updated articles from the latter (the counterpart of *Les Temps Modernes*). Here and there, one finds an interesting analysis of or accurate commentary on French society. For example, they offer a thought-provoking contrast between France and the United States, which owes much to historian François Furet when he wrote: "Americans are capitalists and not bourgeois, while most of the French are bourgeois and not capitalist" (37). Nevertheless, from the outside, this essay conveys the authors' general frustration, as if they refuse to recognize Sarkozy's clear victory in the 2007 presidential elections. Because they focus exclusively on the President's shortcomings and controversial decisions, their book clearly lacks a sense of balance and fairness.

## CONCLUSION

Of these three books, Chirac's lively and well-written autobiography is clearly the most instructive in terms of foreign policy and international affairs. Clerc's book on De Gaulle and Malraux recounts many events and anecdotes on two fascinating political figures. It does not rely on existing sources only (mainly biographies and memoirs) but provides new details gathered from interviews with numerous people who had worked with both politicians and from selected members of their families (see the list on page 385); it is moreover an excellent overview of the French Fifth Republic. Lastly, the essay on President Sarkozy does not succeed in explaining why the majority of French voters accepted his political agenda, which was publicly discussed over three years before the 2007 elections. Recent events confirm that Sarkozy's main approach is to initiate and attempt to bring about reforms in different ways, as though following the principle that it is better to act than to stay still. President Sarkozy is clearly committed to action, which is his main characteristic and perhaps his best quality. Although not everything can succeed at once when it comes to reforms, this president at least shows great initiative and will to work.

Of course, these three books were not meant to discuss international relations and related issues; still, sometimes one can find important new details in sources that are not meant to contribute directly to the study of history, comparative politics, governance, or geopolitics. Because they are not yet available in English, non-Francophone readers will find here a little sample of their contents.