

Letter From Paris

by Curtis Cate

François Mitterrand: Metternich or Gladstone?

Two troublesome problems have, from time immemorial, bedeviled political regimes of every sort, from the most autocratic despotisms to the most wildly permissive of democracies. The first is the problem of advancing age and the kind of *rigor mentis* that is apt to afflict rulers during the final years of their "reigns." The second, closely linked to the first, is the perennial problem of political succession—the problem that hereditary monarchies long sought to solve through the principle of primogeniture, but which, as the recent downfall of Margaret Thatcher proved, can also plague constitutional monarchies.

The extravagantly long reign of Louis XIV—no less than 72 years (1643-1715)—is a classic case of the *rigor mentis* that can all too easily overtake rulers in their declining years. Although it would be rash and simplistic to claim that everything he did during the first forty years of his reign was truly enlightened, it is certain that from the year 1685 on, when under the influence of a bigoted mistress he repealed the Edict of Nantes that had granted French Protestants freedom of worship in a predominantly Catholic France, thus precipitating a catastrophic exodus of honest, hardworking Huguenots toward Protestant Prussia, almost everything Louis XIV undertook was to the long-term detriment of France.

Another classic example of mental ossification is that of Metternich of Austria, that paragon of conservative "statesmanship" whose 39-year reign (1809-1848) dedicated to immobile "order" and "stability" came to grief in the revolutionary upheavals of 1848.

Our own century has already produced a dozen examples of political senility. We can begin the list with France's two First World War leaders,

Georges Clemenceau and Raymond Poincaré—the first of whom at the age of 75 sabotaged the young Emperor Karl of Austria's sensible attempt to negotiate peace with the Allies in 1916-1917, while the second's brutal policy toward Germany in the early 1920's helped to fan the patriotic resentment that brought Adolf Hitler to power ten years later. There is the pathetic case of Franklin Roosevelt, whose last two years culminated in the diplomatic debacle of Yalta and the sudden arrival at the White House of an inexperienced successor, Harry Truman, who until he assumed office had been casually excluded from regular cabinet meetings. Though markedly different in their philosophical and political ideals, Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, Antonio Salazar of Portugal, and Enver Hoxha of Albania were all dedicated to maintaining a virtually immutable status quo for a number of decades. There is the case of Leonid Brezhnev, whose name is now synonymous with political and economic stagnation, and, on a more monstrous level, there is that of Joseph Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili who, had he not suffered a lethal stroke in his 74th year (1953), would have plunged his country into the abyss of another Stalinist purge. There is the equally grotesque case of Mao Tse-tung, who was persuaded by a fanatical mistress-wife to embark on a "Cultural Revolution" that cost China millions of lives.

Even leaders who have every right to be regarded as great political figures can easily fall victim to the stubborn obtuseness and overconfidence that dogs those who have enjoyed a relatively long period in power. Classic in this respect was the inflexible behavior of the octogenarian Konrad Adenauer in August 1961 when, in response to the challenging erection of Walter Ulbricht's wall, he refused to fly immediately to Berlin, preferring instead to deliver a partisan campaign speech in which he referred slightly to his rival, Willy Brandt, Oberbürgermeister of Berlin, as "Herr Frahm" (a cruel reference to the Socialist leader's ille-

gitimate birth)—a major tactical blunder that cost Adenauer's CDU party dearly in the subsequent elections. For good measure and to bring the list back to France, we can also cite the case of Charles de Gaulle who, not content to get rid of his prime minister, Georges Pompidou—for having failed to deal properly with the student uprisings of May-June 1968 and, even worse, for having dared to suggest that he should be the General's logical successor to the presidency—proceeded in 1969 to commit political *hara-kiri* by trying to do away with the French Senate on the spurious grounds that it had outlived its usefulness as a "secondary" parliamentary chamber.

Which brings us to François Mitterrand, who last May celebrated the tenth anniversary of his accession to the presidency at the respectable age of 73. Nobody could reasonably accuse this extraordinary political chameleon of having lost his flair for flexible maneuver, as was brilliantly demonstrated during the Persian Gulf crisis, when his performance in seeking to play the role of honest or at least "comprehending" broker between George Bush and Saddam Hussein was a minor *chef-d'oeuvre* of diplomatic ambiguity. And yet . . . and yet . . . the implausible is now happening, and certain Frenchmen who are anything but crackpots have begun comparing François Mitterrand to Prince Metternich, no less!

Unless I am mistaken, the first to make this striking comparison was Paul Fabra. A veteran observer of the economic scene, Paul Fabra has long written commentaries on the international situation that are relegated to the back pages of *Le Monde*. But early last July the editors of France's most prestigious daily decided to give Fabra's latest contribution front-page prominence under the arresting headline and subtitle, "Mitterrand-Metternich: Does the Chief of State like Europe as much as might be hoped?"

The answer to this question was a resounding no. Ever since the sudden collapse of the Berlin Wall, celebrated

on November 9, 1989, with fireworks and champagne, the French president and his foreign policy advisers have, according to Fabra, done everything possible to maintain the old status quo in Europe. So perturbed was François Mitterrand by that totally unexpected "happening" that on December 6, 1989, he made a hasty trip to Kiev to discuss this worrying development with Mikhail Gorbachev, followed several weeks later by a hasty trip to East Germany, which could only be interpreted as a gesture of goodwill toward Erich Honecker and other discredited Communist leaders. Neither of these needless diplomatic forays was accidental; on the contrary, both reflected the conviction formulated by Foreign Minister Roland Dumas to the French National Assembly on November 15, 1989 (exactly six days after the Berlin Wall's collapse), in these anything but prescient words: "We know today that the reunification [of Germany] cannot be a current problem" (in French, a "*problème d'actualité*").

Old prejudices die hard, even in supposedly Cartesian France, and this particular Germanphobia has proved to be one of them. But what is truly astounding, as Fabra went on to point out, is that this stubborn hostility to change has not simply been focused on a disintegrating Soviet Union and an ominously reuniting Germany; it has embraced virtually all of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Thus, on the eve of the June 12-14 conference that was organized this year in Prague, under the chairmanship of Vaclav Havel, to discuss the feasibility of forming a European Confederation (a pet Mitterrand project), the French president roundly declared, with an arrogance even Charles de Gaulle would have been hard put to match, that it would be "tens and tens of years" before the suppliant countries of Central and Eastern Europe would be allowed admission to that exclusive club, the European Economic Community.

There is, of course, nothing new or specifically French about this reluctance to accept change in Central and Eastern Europe. Ever since 1968 (and I would be tempted to say ever since 1961, when General de Gaulle's reaction to the erection of the Berlin Wall was as loftily abstract as Harold

Macmillan's and Jack Kennedy's), the prevailing instinct among Western leaders has been "not to rock the boat." And indeed, so ingrained has this apprehensive instinct become in France that it has almost always been members of the opposition who, usually for purely partisan reasons, have upheld "dissidents" and others in communist countries who were challenging the hated "system." Thus, during the late 1970's, it was none other than François Mitterrand who once took Valéry Giscard d'Estaing to task for having flown to Warsaw to see Leonid Brezhnev, as though to seek his approval before an important meeting of European ministers, stigmatizing the French president as "the messenger-boy from Venice."

As Fabra was writing his lead article for *Le Monde*, another threat to the established order was exploding in Yugoslavia. And how did François Mitterrand react to this new crisis? Exactly as did almost every other leader in the West—and here we must include James Baker. He condemned the immoderate haste that Slovenes and Croats were displaying in deciding to break away from an overly centralized "federation" dominated by a still communist-controlled Serbia.

Just six days after the publication of Fabra's front-page article, *Le Monde* (July 9) published an even more blistering critique, in the form of an interview with philosopher Alain Finkielkraut. And once again the Metternichean comparison was rolled out of the cupboard.

The Soviet Union and Serbia depend on the West for their survival. It is thus possible to get Gorbachev to come to terms, just as yesterday it was possible to force the Belgrade government to accept the transformation of Yugoslavia into a confederation of Sovereign states. Instead of that, our president has chosen the perpetuation of colonialism and injustice. He could, like Metternich, say: "With me, the first moral element is immobility"—but with this difference, that Metternich knew very well that he was combating liberal principles,

whereas our president proclaims himself to be their defender.

What a flabbergasting diplomacy, which sides with the crushing of small nations in the name of the struggle against nationalism. A republic that keeps spouting about "differences," but which wants to see one head and one head only in Europe, a republic that honors hip-hop culture and which is impudently ignorant of Slovene culture. Long live *le rap*! Down with Slovenia! The two things go hand in hand.

But, the observant reader may at this point ask, what has Gladstone to do with all this? And why should his name be associated in any way with that of François Mitterrand? William Gladstone, an emphatic liberal in the 19th-century meaning of this now shopworn term, was the very opposite of Metternich, a resolute advocate of "change" and "progress." Shortly after his triumphal return to power in 1893, at the robust age of 84, he tried to rush a bill through Parliament intended to settle the Irish problem "once and for all." The House of Commons, however, refused to be stampeded, and Gladstone came a cropper. It was then that Lord Randolph Churchill, Winston's father, described Gladstone as an "old man in a hurry."

Is François Mitterrand this kind of old man? Almost certainly not. But certain disturbing developments suggest that he, too, is in a hurry. There is, for example, his latest folly in the field of architectonic grandiosity: the four-towered complex of the future Grande Bibliothèque de France, which will soon disgrace the skyline of southeastern Paris, a monumental steel-glass-and-concrete mausoleum in which library bookworms will have to do their borrowing underground.

Then there is the French president's immoderate haste in wishing to make his peace with Khomeini's successors by making a state visit to Tehran. The way for this dubious initiative was paved some months ago by the arbitrary release from prison (ordered by Mitterrand) of Anis Naccache, the terrorist leader of a five-man commando squad whom Khomeini had dispatched to Paris in the early 1980's to assassinate

Iran's former prime minister, Shahpur Bakhtiar, and who, though failing to finish off the "criminal," managed to gun down and kill an innocent woman and a French policeman.

Did Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (now trying to stage a political comeback) denounce this craven capitulation to crass expediency? Not that I know of, and for a simple reason. In January 1979, when Shahpur Bakhtiar was belatedly appointed premier by the reluctant shah of Iran, he immediately summoned the French ambassador and asked him to transmit an urgent telegram to the Quai d'Orsay in Paris, requesting that the French government do everything in its power to delay Khomeini's departure from his refuge at Neauphle-le-Château, west of Paris. The message was received by the foreign minister, Jean François-Poncet, who dutifully transmitted the request to President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. "Nothing doing!" was Giscard's glib reply, dictated by some arcane motive of Machiavellian *Unrealpolitik*. France had no "legal" way of preventing the ayatollah from returning to his homeland if he wished.

Few French men and women know this shocking story, and even fewer are aware of the no less shocking sequel. Not only did Giscard d'Estaing fail to raise a finger to impede Khomeini's departure, he even offered him an Air France plane to carry him back in magic carpet triumph to Tehran. When the ayatollah and his joyous suite reached the special plane, parked on an Orly airfield tarmac, they were greeted by four hostesses wearing neat Air France caps. The ayatollah stopped, scowled, and issued a gruff command in Persian, duly translated into French. Those four hostesses had to wear a *chador* before he would deign to set a sandal inside that airliner. Fortunately for the honor of France, or what is left of it, the four hostesses refused. Whereupon the directors of Air France had them replaced by four male stewards.

"I feel nothing but contempt for Monsieur Giscard d'Estaing," Shahpur Bakhtiar said to me several years ago when I went to call on him at his well-guarded villa in the western suburbs of Suresnes. "François Mitterrand, on the other hand, has the makings of a statesman."

Today, I can't help wondering if this is still his feeling. (Editor's note: Mr. Bakhtiar was found stabbed to death at his villa on August 8.)

Curtis Cate, a biographer and historian, has for years been a disabused observer of French politics and politicians.

Letter From the Lower Right

by John Shelton Reed

Taking the Tenth

A year or so ago, a concerned citizen asked Carl Fox, our district attorney, to listen to 2 Live Crew's nasty album *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*. Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., of the Duke English department had just argued in the *New York Times* that the album's lyrics were a valid expression of the vibrant folk culture of African-Americans, but our D.A. wasn't buying it. He's black himself, but he didn't have

the advantage of a Duke education, having gone instead to the state university (where, as a matter of fact, he took a course from me). Carl thought the record was both misogynistic and obscene, as it most certainly was, and announced that he would prosecute any record dealer who sold it in his jurisdiction.

Guess what? His phone started ringing off the hook, and before very long, he backed down. He said that most of the voters who elected him appear to believe, "shockingly so, that the only thing that should be restricted is child sex."

I'm glad he's shocked, but he's probably right about voter opinion. I'm afraid putting up with obscene rap songs is one of the prices we have to pay for the dwindling pleasure of living in Chapel Hill. Those of us who believe in local control have to take the bitter with the sweet.

* * *

You know, communities really ought to decide these matters for themselves, even if they decide wrong. But our legal system doesn't make that easy. The Supreme Court now includes "contemporary community standards"

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