

The Gaullist mayor of Paris is looking beyond city hall

The Future of Jacques Chirac and, Maybe, of Europe

Jeffrey Robinson

When the French were preparing for their legislative elections in spring '78 . . . when it looked like the Left could sneak past the Right and take over . . . Jacques Chirac set up offices in the only real skyscraper in Paris, the Tour Montparnasse.

He needed a lot of room, and he wanted everything new and modern. Women sat around tables opening letters, receipting contributions, stuffing printed speeches into envelopes. Men in grey suits moved from office to office at a pace that made one think there was something very urgent happening. Phones rang constantly. The walls were covered with photos and posters of Jacques Chirac. Pencil holders on desks were plastic cups with Chirac's picture. His name and face were everywhere. The scene was reminiscent of Richard Nixon's campaign headquarters in 1968. The only difference was that Nixon had the presidency at stake then and Chirac didn't . . . at least he wouldn't say he did.

The mayor of Paris and also the deputy from Correze—the French can and usually try to hold more than one elected position—Chirac is also president of the RPR, the *Rassemblement Pour la République*, the political party he formed from the ashes of the old *Union des Démocrates Pour la République* (UDR), the party of Charles de Gaulle.

A tall and somewhat nervous forty-six years old, Chirac served as prime minister from May, 1974, until August, 1976, when he stepped down due to ideological differences with Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. Returning to his constituency, he was reelected deputy. He then set up the RPR and used his power there to campaign for the Paris City Hall, where he beat Giscard's handpicked candidate. Because French society is so centralized in Paris—nothing happens officially

anywhere in France without some bureaucrat in Paris giving his O.K.—the mayoral post is probably as powerful, if not more powerful, than many of the president's cabinet ministries. It is such a powerful post that the generally suspicious French have set up a system in which the Paris police report, not to the mayor, but to a federal minister so as to avoid giving the mayor enough power literally to take over the federal government. Paranoia—called *méfiance* in France—seems to be inborn.

Elected to the mayor's office, Chirac makes headlines all over the country. He even made headlines in the States—although minor ones—when Jimmy Carter went to Paris and Chirac refused to meet him. The mayor of Paris considered it a snub that the president of the United States would not call on him at City Hall, instead of the mayor of Paris going to meet the American president. Chirac is perhaps the most visible of all French political leaders—and that is saying something. One doesn't see Giscard very much. He lets his prime minister, Raymond Barre, get seen, and the prime minister absorbs a great deal of the public criticism that would otherwise be aimed at the president. The Socialist leader, François Mitterand, is constantly meeting with the press; and the Communist leader, Georges Marchais, feels he is entitled to press coverage whenever any other politicians get some so that he can refute what they've said. So if Chirac gets seen more than the others, he has to be working at it.

Six months before the 1978 elections he whistle-stopped in three *départements* every week, spending a day in each being photographed for local front pages. For nearly a year before the elections there were posters all over France promising "A better France, with Jacques Chirac and the RPR." His speeches have always been of the mass-rally kind that, when filmed for the evening news, look like major political events. Combined with all the activity in the Tour Montparnasse, it certainly seemed that Jacques Chirac had al-

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ready tossed his hat into the ring for the 1981 presidential campaign. Why should he have bothered to campaign all over France, when his name appeared on the ballot only in Correze?

No, Chirac explains, he was not campaigning for himself. His interest then was simply in getting his RPR candidates elected to the legislature. And he did that. RPR didn't win as many seats as Chirac had predicted, but it made a showing that could be considered as good as the Socialists, and certainly much better than Giscard's Republic party. The RPR was confirmed as the majority party in the group of parties on the right.

Following the election the RPR left the Tour Montparnasse for more modest offices, but Chirac didn't stop looking like a presidential candidate. He has been traveling around the country ever since, made a trip to China in the fall of 1978, and, after meeting the mayor of New York in Paris, he announced he would head soon for the States.

Chirac is accessible, but his conversation is very careful. He does not care to talk about himself. He does not see politicians as personalities the way we do in the States. He puts conditions on his interviews. In this case he wanted all the

questions to be submitted in writing in advance. My answer was no. He then said he must be permitted to read and edit the interview before it was published. Again the answer was no. "In that case," the press attaché interjected, "no direct quotes may be used. O.K.? Come on, play fair." Because the no-direct-quote agreement was the only way to get to Chirac, the deal was made. It doesn't change very much.

The excuse was offered that Jacques Chirac must be very careful because the press has not always been kind to him. He explained—in very competent English—that French papers have sometimes accused him of being a conservative, extreme rightist, and even a fascist. Those names he could excuse because they were used by French papers of the opposition parties, usually during an election, and that was all part of the game. But the foreign press, and he specifically mentioned the American press, had shocked him. He said he had read descriptions of himself in the American press and did not know who they were talking about. He denies that he is a conservative, extreme rightist, or a fascist. He says he is a Gaullist. Authoritarian or fascist politics, he claims, is opposite to the temperament of the Gaullists, whose politics he defines as based totally on democracy.

To prove this he points to the 1969 referendum that brought down Charles de Gaulle. Claiming that it had

not been a vote of confidence—which in the strictest constitutional sense it was not, although it served the same purpose—Chirac says De Gaulle could have remained in office after losing the referendum. He stepped down, however, because he sensed that was what the people wanted him to do. Gaullists, Chirac insists, always rely on the wishes of the voters even when they are not favorable to Gaullism.

He cites also his own election to the Chamber of Deputies after he resigned as prime minister. He says he did not have to run again but did so because the people wanted him to. Had his Correze constituency not asked him to return to politics, he says, he would have quit forever. He would not have formed the RPR nor run for mayor of Paris. He says, in effect—and in the slightly aggressive tone that has come to mark his public statements since resigning as prime minister—had he not been welcomed home with open arms, the press wouldn't have had Jacques Chirac to kick around anymore.

He prefers to believe that the RPR has taken the best of the Left and the best of the Right. A number of conservative parties in Europe have approached Chirac to join in a Europe-wide conservative movement as a counterpoint to the Europe-wide socialist movement. Chirac has always said no. He doesn't believe he has all that much in common with them. He considers himself a member of the rightist majority and he staunchly opposes the leftist opposition. But, he insists, he is not a conservative. He is a Gaullist. He is not concerned with conservative politics. He is concerned with Gaullism.

He has definite views of the role the Gaullists should play as a force in the European community. De Gaulle, he says, was neither an isolationist nor a nationalist. He was, according to Chirac, a national—and a national isn't the same thing as an isolationist or a nationalist. De Gaulle always wanted the French to be independent, which is why he expelled NATO forces and disengaged France from a part of the alliance. Military intervention by France, said De Gaulle, and Chirac agrees, must be decided solely by the French when it meets French interests.

Carrying this line of thinking further, Chirac is adamant that European matters be decided solely by Europeans. He feels that an independent Europe should be linked in some ways to the United States, but he is not convinced that American interests are always in tune with French or European interests. He cites the attitude of the oil-consuming nations during the crisis of a few years ago. Chirac felt at the time that Europe should have an independent oil policy. When the European nations met in Washington, Prime Minister Chirac's instruction to the French representative was to refuse to cooperate. And look, says Chirac, the French were right to go their own way because Europe still doesn't have an independent oil policy. Europe and the United States did nothing, and Chirac believes the French have lost four years because of it. This would not have been the result, he says, had the Europeans formulated their own policy, without the U.S. In the meantime gas prices in France are up again, now hovering around \$3 a gallon. He adds that he is sorry to see how all too often France's partners in Europe prefer to deal with the U.S. rather than organize with the rest of Europe. He has declared in a public speech, "I am against the fact that, every time our partners find themselves balanced between the interests of a united independent Europe and those of the United States, some of them have chosen the latter."

It now looks as though no one risked more in those legislative elections last year than Jacques Chirac. He and Giscard do not see eye to eye on a good many points, and in the first round of those elections RPR candidates ran against Republicans as well as against candidates from the other parties. In the second round a deal was made that there would be only one candidate for the Right, and the deal was generally adhered to. In almost every case Chirac and Giscard worked to avoid a split in the rightist vote, and the Right managed to stay in control, but by a margin of only 1 per cent. Had Chirac and the RPR not emerged as the most powerful faction on the Right, Chirac's political career would have been in serious trouble. But, as it happened, the vocal, visible, and wide-ranging Jacques Chirac appears to be on a continuing campaign trail. **WV**