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Books

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Gaulling

by [David Pryce-Jones](#)

On *Testimony: France in the Twenty-first Century* by Nicolas Sarkozy.

Nicolas Sarkozy

Testimony: France in the Twenty-first Century
Pantheon, 272 pages, \$24.95

For Nicolas Sarkozy, it has always been a question of destiny to become President of France. His belief in himself is absolute, and seemingly not far misplaced. As minister for finance and then home affairs, he proved a politician whose intelligence was equal to his ambition. Jacques Chirac, the incumbent president these past twelve years, promoted him at first, only to perceive him with a jealous eye as a more gifted rival who should not be allowed to succeed him in the Elysée Palace. No holds barred either: Sarkozy was accused of holding an illicit account in a Luxembourg bank, but the evidence for this smear had obviously been forged, implicating some of the highest in the land. The scandal is currently being hushed-up, in the way the French are used to dealing with nastiness of the kind. In the event, Sarkozy was elected President handsomely, on a high turn-out, and he also has a large parliamentary majority. France is his to do what he wants with it.

Sarkozy is among the few recent Presidents who is not a graduate of the elite schools that train the French governing class. A first-generation Frenchman, he is the son of an Hungarian émigré with dubious aristocratic pretensions. To have a Jewish grandparent, furthermore, is no asset in today's France. Challengingly, he is on record offering opinions about the United States, and even the free market, that can be taken as fairly well-disposed even though carefully qualified for his voters. A believer in activism for its own sake, imp-like, he races everywhere with a slightly manic grin on his face, and a Blairite conviction in his powers of persuasion. A rather comic debate arose about whether his habit of jogging is too undignified for a President. Marital to-ing and fro-ing with his wife Cécilia also makes him seem a great deal more human than the weirdly aloof and bombastic men who have preceded him in the Presidency.

But what is to be done with France? Innumerable books and op-ed articles by the best brains available posit national decline and an identity crisis. Immobility stems from two iron-clad sources, an all-encompassing welfare state and the extra protectionism enshrined in the European Union. Originally manipulated by the French for the purpose of giving them a hold over Germany, the EU has now grown into an empire, as its current Portuguese President boasts. No longer sovereign, the component nation-states are colonies locked into industrial, financial, social, and legal straitjackets from which they cannot escape. The outcome was not anticipated. According to measurements of productivity, exports, and indebtedness, France has been slipping down crucial statistical tables, while correspondingly rising on tables of taxation and unemployment. Having had enough of it, the

electorate voted against the treaty designed to give the EU its final imperial structure.

The demographic plight is even more alarming. Like other European nations, the French are not reproducing themselves. To sustain population, a nation needs 2.1 children per family—the present rate in France is 1.89. Moreover the native French are being replaced by Muslims who have a far higher birth rate and already account for a third of total births, according to some estimates. Again according to estimates, Muslims number some six million, or one in ten of the population, enough to suggest that a bi-national state is in the making. Mark Steyn dramatized this future unforgettably when he said, “the only question is how bloody the transfer of real estate will be.”

Apparently either unable or unwilling to assimilate, the Muslims live for the most part in ghettos, virtually no-go areas as though under some strange civil version of sharia law. Just over eighteen months ago, two teenagers jumped over the fence of a generating station and were electrocuted. Instant rioting in over 300 cities and towns revealed the depth of the racial tension. Official figures state that in the course of 2005 an astonishing 110,206 incidents of urban violence were recorded, mostly taking the form of attacks on the police, and setting fire to public institutions and private cars. Sarkozy at the time defined the rioters by the general term of *racaille*, or scum; by and large the authorities refrained from spelling out the role played by Muslims. Rule by emergency decree was in operation for weeks. Subsequently a proposal to make a small but sensible change in employment law for the young was enough to galvanize the unions, bring out the mob, and enforce yet another government humiliation.

The demographic deficit has been growing for four or five decades, but the stagnation and the rage alike are the special legacy of Jacques Chirac. Preoccupied with French standing in the world, he deployed his energies to build a coalition with Russia, Germany, and the Arab world. Opposition to American foreign policy was the sole feature common to these powers, but that was enough, and Chirac gloried in it. No amount of murder and terror could disturb his support for Saddam Hussein and Yasser Arafat. Essentially an unimaginative man, he left urgent domestic issues to take care of themselves—politics for him has been all about intrigue and place and money. Thus a miasma of corruption at home and abroad envelops him, all the more putrid since he had the law changed to remove himself beyond the reach of accountability. No previous President, not even de Gaulle, has been so thoroughly Bourbon.

Testimony is the book published in Sarkozy's name for electoral purposes. To judge from its contents, he may well have neither written nor read it. “To build and to love. . . . The primary mission of a politician is to give hope. . . . I love our nation.” Change, clean breaks, dreams, action, remaking, new—such vote-for-me guff, tricked out page after page with a forest of exclamation marks, is embarrassing, mortifying.

In contrast, what has he actually done? With political brilliance, he has scuppered the opposing Socialists by poaching a number of their best people, for instance appointing Bernard Kouchner, founder of Doctors Without Borders, to the Foreign Ministry. No real enemies remain either to the Left or to the Right. Cartoonists depict him as Tsarkozy or Napoleon. His prime minister is relegated to a mere managerial role. In his cabinet, Sarkozy has more than the regulation number of women and minority representatives (though one of them turns out to have two brothers accused of drug-dealing).

At Brussels, he has lobbied successfully for French protectionism, in particular permission to break the budgetary rules. The French may have voted against the EU treaty, but thanks to him and Frau Merkel, the German Chancellor, it is business as usual, and there is no need to pay attention to anything so fleeting as a negative referendum. Like everybody else, the French are going to get the treaty just the same, though as a sweetener for them he has managed to have removed a commitment to the market and “free and undistorted competition,” the very feature held in France to be the

essence of Anglo-Saxon capitalist horror. In regard to the United States, he emphasizes that the Iraq campaign is a “historic mistake,” and France would not be “submissive.” Indeed he asks his American friends “to let us be free, free to be their friends,” implying that they cannot be friends as things now stand. Refusing to condemn Hezbollah as a terrorist organization and a state within a state, he has invited its leaders to a conference on Lebanon. A characteristic rumor then spread that the Israelis might take them hostage in exchange for the two soldiers whose abduction by Hezbollah sparked off the war of 2006.

Sarkozy’s presidency will depend ultimately on how he interprets that word *racaille*, which comes down to whether a way can be found to integrate the six million Muslims; and if not, what happens then. Otherwise, *Testimony* notwithstanding, it looks as if he is turning into a French President like any other, only more hectic.

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