THE INTERNATIONAL ECONOMY
THE MAGAZINE OF INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC POLICY
888 16th Street, N.W., Suite 740
Washington, D.C. 20006
Phone: 202-861-0791 • Fax: 202-861-0790
www.international-economy.com

The Post-Chirac *French Funk*

BY SIMON SERFATY

Is a refurbished U.S-Franco relationship in the cards?

The French are in a funk. Call their condition a *malaise*, and assess it as an identity crisis as they complain of too much Europe in their midst. Or speak of *ennui*, and evoke a leadership crisis, after over fifty years of political theater dominated by three men—two of them dead and the third finally ready to go. Or note a widespread societal *fatigue* born out of too many immigrants and too little solidarity. In all instances the French word is readily understandable in English too, which is fitting because much of what is said of France can also be said of its main European neighbors, where English has become a common second language: when one of Europe's main countries is restless, tired, or bored, so is the European Union, whatever language is used to notice it.

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Thus, a significant feature of this French presidential election is that it is one in a series of elections taking place throughout Europe. In most cases, the returns have hurt the governing majorities, which were either weakened if previously strong (as with Tony Blair in Britain) or replaced if weak (as with Gerhard Schröder in Germany). There have been such periods in the past—most recently in 1979–83, when elections in Britain (Margaret Thatcher in 1979), France (François Mitterrand in 1981), Spain (Felipe González in 1982), and Germany (Helmut Kohl in 1983) produced a "revolution" of sorts in each country: from Left to Right in Britain and Germany, and from Right to Left in France and Spain. But unlike the stability that followed at the time—with each new head of state or government in office for no less than a decade and for as long as sixteen years—few of the newly elected leaders may prove able to last longer than the term for which they are elected or named, unless they can deliver on the populist demands that most of them will have ridden to fulfill their ambitions.

These changes matter one at a time no less than in their totality. In the 1980s, they eased a renewal of the Atlantic Alliance, inspired by President Ronald Reagan at the 1983 Williamsburg Summit of the G7, and of the European Community, with Mitterrand at the helm of the 1984 European Summit in Fontainebleau: Reagan because he showed an instinctive talent for dealing with the new European Left while working especially well

Nicolas Sarkozy

ANTONIN BORGEAUD

The Two Musketeers

Ségolène Royal

With Nicolas Sarkozy and Ségolène Royal—Sarko and Ségo, as they say in France, though not always affectionately or even sympathetically—France at last had two new candidates in 2007. That alone would have been enough for this election to be unprecedented in France's modern history—he, the plain-spoken son of a Hungarian immigrant; she, an unmarried woman with four children; and both with a presidential ambition that would have been unthinkable a mere few years ago.

A third man emerged in the spring, pretending that he could build a new consensus from the center. François Bayrou's sudden rise in the polls, however, was not because he succeeded in giving the centrism he embodies the substance it lacks. Instead, what was most centrist about Bayrou was his personality and demeanor—a candidate neither devoured by his ambitions, like Sarko, nor in search of her convictions, like Ségo.

—S. Serfaty

François Bayrou

with Thatcher, and Mitterrand because he knew how to address the new European Right and worked especially well with Kohl. These forceful leaders—political giants of sort—were men of convictions who did not embrace each other's ideas but respected each other. Together, they won the Cold War with a cohesive Alliance and a dynamic European Union that could subsequently make Europe gradually whole and finally free.

In the current period, the significance that political changes in any one country may have on its partners in Europe and across the Atlantic was first shown in Spain in March 2004, when the surprising defeat of José-María Aznar's hand-picked successor modified the political dynamics of the European Union and the Alliance by weakening Britain and the coalition of the willing it had formed with the United States and within Europe. Eighteen months later, the pattern was reversed in Germany, when Angela Merkel's close victory weakened France in the European Union and reinforced the U.S. position in the Alliance. Even as Europeans await eagerly the next presidential elections in the United States, Americans should, therefore, watch with care the final outcome of the French elections, on May 6, 2007, as well as other political changes that are scheduled to take place with or ahead of new elections—including a new President in Turkey in May, a new Prime Minister in Britain this summer, and, possibly, early elections in Italy or even, but less likely, Germany and Britain in 2008.

Even the twenty-six years of presidential rule for Mitterrand, who became President in 1981, and Chirac, who replaced him in 1995, understate these two men's endurance. The average French citizen is thirty-

France is of such high significance to and in the United States because it is of even higher significance in and to Europe.

REMY GALBADA, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Sarkozy's Trump Card

Nearly one-third of the French now describe themselves as racist, and more than 60 percent assert that there are some kinds of behavior that justifies racism, with 56 percent complaining that there are too many foreigners—meaning, foreign born immigrants, with or without French citizenship—in France.

Why otherwise would Sarkozy plan for his government a minister of Immigration and National Identity? In a country where one out of four Frenchmen has an immigrant as a parent or a grandparent, the mere juxtaposition of "immigration" and "national identity" is troubling, as if there was a potential clash between them. But that juxtaposition confirms that in a modern democracy convictions need not stand in the way of ambitions: the end justifies the means, and the future will justify the ends.

—S. Serfaty

A youth stands by a burning car during clashes with police forces at the La Reynerie housing complex in the Mirail district of Toulouse, November 2005.

eight years old: he was barely born when Jacques Chirac became prime minister in 1975, which is also the year of Mitterrand's second presidential bid; his parents were going to primary school when Mitterrand first ran for the presidency in 1965 (and Chirac entered the government in 1967); and her grandparents were retiring when Mitterrand was first named in a government of the Fourth Republic in 1956 (and de Gaulle, in political exile for the previous ten years, was plotting his return two years later). With Nicolas Sarkozy and Ségolène Royal—Sarko and Ségo, as they say in France, though not always affectionately or even sympathetically—France at last had two new candidates in 2007. That alone would have been enough for this election to be unprecedented in France's modern history—he, the plain-spoken son of a Hungarian immigrant; she, an unmarried woman with four children; and both with a presidential ambition that would have been unthinkable a mere few years ago.

Both Royal and Sarkozy, it is said, are American politicians with a French passport. At first, their goal was to win over and reinforce their respective constituencies on the Left and on the Right. The calendar of a presidential election in France is compelling. The first round is a sort of nation-wide primary to nominate the two candidates who fight it out two weeks later in a conclusive runoff for the presidency, when the centrist vote usually proves decisive. Thus, Sarkozy's crude discourse on the nation's identity—"love it or leave it"—was designed to satisfy a French populace that has become increasingly receptive to the ideas of law and order previously associated with the far right. This is not quite *fraternité*, but even though Sarkozy's "non-negotiable values" are embraced by a large majority of his majority party (and, tellingly, by a majority of Socialists too), he is feared by more than half of the French people, according to most polls. Where Sarkozy seemed to articulate an idea of the nation, Ségolène Royal chose to present an idea of herself—"love me or leave me." A renewed discourse on *solidarité* was, therefore, Royal's weapon of choice:

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French Headache

Angela Merkel's close victory weakened France in the European Union and reinforced the U.S. position in the Alliance.

—S. Serfaty

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"I will not forget anyone," she claimed, whether within her party or among its leaders and everywhere in France, depending on circumstances.

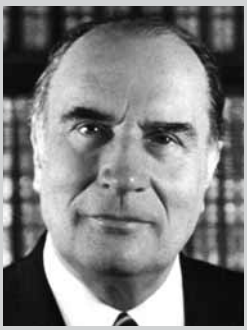
As a result, both candidates have inflated their promises far beyond what the French economy can afford or the French polity endure. The cost of the "gifts" pledged to their constituencies exceeds $65 billion for Sarkozy (plus $85 billion worth of reductions in compulsory payroll deductions) and $75 billion at least for Royal's so-called 100 proposals. For each, Sarko and Ségo, a quick start in the direction they favor will be imperative. That is the Thatcher factor, and it is also what Mitterrand attempted in 1981, and Chirac in 1995—both unsuccessfully. With nearly half of the French electorate convinced that the election will make no difference, neither program seems convincing, however, which points to much resistance to any attempt at reform this fall, as the public anger likely aimed at the Elysée Palace is likely to be exacerbated by deepening cleavages between natives and immigrants, as well as between the haves and have-nots or have-lesses.

With the electorate thus torn between two candidates who challenge their credulity, it is not surprising that a third man emerged in the spring, pretending that he could build a new consensus from the center, as opposed to his rivals who had hoped to come to the center after a detour to the left or to the right. For a brief moment François Bayrou, who was barely noticed when he ran in 2002, appeared to threaten both leading candidates. His sudden rise in the polls, however, was not because Bayrou succeeded in giving the centrism he embodies the substance it lacks. This was instead because what was most centrist about Bayrou was his personality and demeanor—a candidate neither devoured by his ambitions, like Sarko, nor in search of her convictions, like Ségo. In short, the essence of Bayrou's program was to be neither of his two rivals. He was not an answer—meaning a solution. At best, he was a question—meaning a delusion. Lacking a political base that would give him the needed legislative majority in the new National Assembly that will be elected in June, France would be condemned to live in a state of permanent co-habitation for the next five years—hardly a happy prospect for the new Sixth Republic that Bayrou wanted to launch.

Whether the French were better off twelve years ago is not self-evident. Chirac's disastrous decision to hold early legislative elections in 1997, when his party held a compelling parliamentary majority, denied him the ability to govern on his own for most of his first seven-year presidential term, as he was forced to share his power with a socialist prime minister who gave France such highlights as the thirty-five-hour work week and worse. Still, in the end the best that can be said of Chirac is that he is leaving France the way he described it in 1995 when he pledged to "act urgently" in order to heal the country's "social fracture" and provide for "strong and lasting growth" that would rely on tax cuts to deliver more employment, his "absolute priority." Instead, growth and unemployment have barely budged, taxes went up, and social fractures widened. Indeed, discontent has spread so widely as to echo the worst days of the Fourth Republic, and every French citizen—young and old, in the cities and in the suburbs, man and woman—has seized an opportunity to vent his anger over the past two years. In short, Chirac's *fin de règne* has been brutal: rejection of the Constitutional treaty, disorders verging on riots in the suburbs spreading into Paris and other large urban centers, and overall erosion of the President's authority and even relevance.

Still, all candidates were defined by their weaknesses no less than by their strengths. Royal's weakness had lit-

Ronald Reagan



François Mitterand

The Professionals

Ronald Reagan showed an instinctive talent for dealing with the new European Left while working especially well with Thatcher, and Mitterrand knew how to address the new European Right and worked especially well with Kohl. These forceful leaders—political giants of sort—were men of convictions who did not embrace each other's ideas but respected each other. Together, they won the Cold War with a cohesive Alliance and a dynamic European Union that could subsequently make Europe gradually whole and finally free.

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Brutal Report Card

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tle to do with the French inability to elect a woman, which 94 percent of the French affirm to not be the case, but it had plenty to do with a deeply felt reluctance to be governed by a Socialist—which, except for Mitterrand in 1981 and 1988, they have allowed for only three years since 1789—let alone "this" woman and this particular group of socialists, the former untested and not ready to preside, and the latter divided and not organized to win. As to Bayrou, who could depend on only 27 of the 577 seats in parliament, his daunting weakness was his lack of the political base required to win a workable legislative majority in Parliament.

Unlike Royal and Bayrou, however, Sarkozy's weakness, on grounds of moral principles, was also his strength, on grounds of political efficacy: the appeal of a fourth candidate, Jean-Marie Le Pen, whose ideas have gained a national legitimacy that an embarrassed French electorate dares not translate into a vote for him as it did in May 2002, but can readily transfer to Sarkozy in good conscience, possibly in the first round and certainly in the run-off. Fueled by pictures of violence that focus on readily identifiable immigrants from the defunct French empire, and exacerbated by an exaggerated rhetoric that warns against a French society that would allegedly be at least one-fourth Muslim by 2030, exasperation with, and even hostility to, immigrants has become depressingly banal. According to some recent polls, nearly one-third of the French now describe themselves as racist, and more than 60 percent assert that there are some kinds of behavior that justifies racism, with 56 percent complaining that there are too many foreigners—meaning, foreign born immigrants, with or without French citizenship—in France.

Why otherwise would Sarkozy plan for his government a minister of Immigration and National Identity? In a country where one out of four Frenchmen has an immigrant as a parent or a grandparent, the mere juxtaposition of "immigration" and "national identity" is troubling, as if there was a potential clash between them. But that juxtaposition confirms that in a modern democracy convictions need not stand in the way of ambitions: the end justifies the means, and the future will justify the ends.

Which brings us back to Chirac. In the United States, he was said to be calculating and unreliable, but unbeknownst to his detractors, this competent man was also a man of principle who insisted on having his country acknowledge at last its shameful collaborationist past and apologize for the French government's complicit role in the Holocaust—which he did within weeks of his first election in July 1995. In his own ways the outgoing French president was a man of principles who refused to allow "his" capital to be a part of the 500th anniversary of Columbus' voyage because of his horror at the way the conquistadors had behaved, and who declined to go to South Africa so long as there was apartheid. History never loses its sense of humor, and there may come a time when Chirac will be missed—by those in the United States who loved to hate him, but also in France and in Europe by those who were eager to to dismiss him.

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Over the years, France has been America's most outspoken, most reluctant, and most frustrating ally—and, by French standards, so was America too. Paradoxically, each has also been the other's most rewarding and effective partner—France because of her

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central role in making it possible to further the American interest in a united and strong Europe, and the United States because of its decisive role in engineering a new European security order that served France especially well. Yet even in the context of such a history of bilateral discord and cooperation, the French- and Chirac-bashing, as well as the anti-American and anti-Bush discourse, that erupted in 2003 were unprecedented and troubling: a display of ill will, hostility, and even anger that paradoxically unveiled the passion that the United States and France feel for and about each other when either fails to live up to expectations.

After Chirac, and at half past Bush, it is time for the United States and France to stop pretending that life without each other would be easier or better than life together, and it is time for both countries to "re-understand" and accommodate their inability to go it alone, or almost, in new coalitions "of the willing" they might try to form or enter without each other. To so believe *n'est pas du* wishful. The passion that Sarkozy feels for America and Americans is real; it clearly surpasses his compatriots' ambivalence, as well as that of his rivals. Ironically, that could also have been said of Chirac in 1995, though not of Mitterrand in 1981, and that passion for what America is should not be mistaken, therefore, as a blanket endorsement of what America does.

Chirac's adamant opposition to the war in Iraq "did honor to France," reasserted Sarkozy during the campaign. In the future, there will be other clashes but these will hopefully be managed better than was the case over Iraq. Over such decisive issues as the relevance of military force and the future of nuclear weapons, for example, France and the United States are closer to each other than they are to their respective partners of choice, Germany (where there is little taste for anything that is military) and Britain (where there is limited taste for anything that is nuclear). No more time can be lost in exploring the terms of their convergence—over, say, the ongoing Doha round of trade negotiations, the upcoming clash with Iran, the management of radical Islamic groups and their states' sponsors, and the ever-present Arab-Israeli conflict. In these and other cases, French and Americans understand the need to speak to one another, and they can surely hear each other, but they do not seem to know how to listen to the other.

As a middle power, France matters to the United States to the extent that France matters to Europe and Europe to the United States. In other words, France is of such high significance to and in the United States because it is of even higher significance in and to Europe. If anything, it is therefore with regard to the European Union that historians may question Chirac most harshly. Unlike Mitterrand, he left little legacy in leading the Union. Instead, failure of the Constitutional treaty in May 2005 was Chirac's responsibility: for having called a referendum when none was needed, for having misjudged the public mood when sound judgment was demanded, and for not having responded to the electorate when a response was still possible.

This is not the place to revisit this debate. But with the French increasingly critical of European integration—for making them less prosperous (43 percent, as compared to 29 percent for the opposite view) and less comfortable (41 percent, as opposed to 22 percent who think they "live better" thanks to Europe)—restoring Europe's good name in France will demand a commitment that Royal's divided socialist base and Bayrou's absence of a political base would postpone longer and weaken further than is likely to be the case for Sarkozy.

In this context, Angela Merkel's European summit in June already looms decisive, with Merkel at the helm, and on the eve of Tony Blair's departure from office later this summer. For whatever is done then will serve as benchmarks for what will have to be done by the time of France's next EU presidency, in July 2008, following the two transitional presidencies assumed by Portugal and Slovenia during the twelve intervening months.

Thus, the agenda awaiting the new French president is truly daunting: an agenda of transition and an agenda of urgency—transition for the country, to be sure, but also transition for the Union that successive French governments helped start early in the Cold War, and for the Alliance with the United States that France sought immediately after World War II—but also urgency because after a twenty-six-year presidential *pas de deux* there is much to do on all accounts. ◆