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François Mitterrand: the President as 'Political Artist'

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In a famous article anatomising the political work of General de Gaulle, the Hoffmanns described the first President of the Fifth Republic as a 'political artist'. In this respect, if in few others Mitterrand, the first of the Fifth Republic's Presidents to come from the French left, stands in comparison to de Gaulle (Hoffmann and Hoffmann 1968). This is flattering, perhaps, but is in keeping with the way Mitterrand created a winning coalition and then managed his time at the Elysée. Mitterrand (who, like de Gaulle, is still revered by many) was above all a political figure and a politician who understood and used the political culture of the left into which (it has to be remembered) he had moved over the course of a long career. Mitterrand was no philosopher king, but he was the architect of the left's victory in 1981 and of its longest spell in power in French history.

There is a tendency to treat political leaders as exceptional in many respects and as the foresighted or philosophical carriers of wisdom, and in some sense as representing the best of their political culture. In biographies and reviews, the treatment of leaders can verge on the hagiographical although the accounts of insiders make it clear that they react as much as anticipate, and are not the philosopher kings that the public would like them to be. An examination of political leadership, for the political science community, should hardly require justification but, in the nature of the subject area, the biographical approach tends to swamp others, and this is also a popular genre that does not seek out the techniques of power handling or of 'artistry' in its bleaker aspects (Riker 1986).

Looking at the techniques of political leadership is not a way of detracting from the achievements of political leaders, although, by re-examining the nature of their abilities, it may smack of impiety.

Close and impartial examination is especially difficult when the leader is the representative of the nation and expected to carry the burdens of national representation. It is useful to restate that there were many achievements, and this particular review of Mitterrand the politician is not a balance sheet.

Firstly, there have been no politicians on the French left who have been as successful within the institutions of the Fifth Republic as François Mitterrand (allowing for François Hollande who has yet to make a mark since his election in 2012). There have been those skilled at navigating the swamps of political alliance: Guy Mollet, it must not be forgotten, kept the old Socialist Party (the Section française de l'internationale ouvrière – SFIO) show on the road in very difficult times when it was under attack from the enemies of the Republic. There have also been those capable of inspiring future generations: Mendès France is the most obvious, and perhaps Michel Rocard also qualifies. But the genius for tactical manoeuvre and the first political figure of the left of the seven presidents to reach the summit has been Mitterrand, whose completion of the two terms of the septennate is in itself a record for French Presidents (Cole 1997, 102). Thus Mitterrand, with few reservations, can be said to be the one 'political artist' that the French left has produced in the Fifth Republic, and who is unequalled in this ability in French left-wing political history. Thus the contention here is that the political career of François Mitterrand repays particular attention as an exercise in political style and in political creativity (Hayward 1993).

In this study, the work of Riker, as exemplified in 'heresthetics', is the starting point for the understanding of political comportment (Riker 1986). Riker's 'heresthetic' (a neologism) is the politics of manoeuvre in the attempt to attain specific objectives by the leader. It is not a replaying of Machiavelli's advice; Machiavelli is concerned with domination, assertion and the establishment of authority in an unstructured (and violent) world. Riker takes the observer to the core of politics in an open society in which objectives and values are in constant competition and conflict and in which there is no definitive solution; it is 'liberal' in this sense and is not deterministic. A political leader uses 'heresthetic' to structure situations to achieve their most valued outcome. A 'heresthetic' (as Riker points out) is often not seen as 'manipulation' and should be unobtrusive and discreet and not draw attention to itself. Where a manipulation becomes obvious or intrusive it undoes its effectiveness and can be counterproductive. In politics, as in other arts, the artistry lies in concealing the art – in this case in appearing to be straightforward and 'natural' or self evident.

In case this sounds like a Machiavellian injunction, the best place to start might be with Mitterrand's political career and the search for the presidential nomination. François Mitterrand, it will be remembered, started his political career in the Third Republic and continued it through the Vichy regime, Occupation and the Fourth and Fifth Republics (Péan 1994). This in itself is an extraordinary longevity and one that took Mitterrand to the summits of the Fourth Republic and the Fifth. There was, in addition, a change in political outlook no less striking in the course of this career: a move from the right to the left. François Mitterrand started in politics (very probably) on the extreme right, and moved steadily leftward, ending as a leftist, if patrician, figure admired by many former political opponents and by the French public - finalising a long 60-year political career in high regard. There are few politicians who have reinvented themselves with such success, but this is not a disqualification from high office, or high regard; Churchill, it should be remembered, was also able to 'cross the floor', 'ratting and re-ratting'. François Mitterrand also had the ability, given to few but the most persistent of political leaders, of recovering from near disastrous political situations with something like equivalent status. In this, the parallels are, again perhaps, Churchill but also the American leadership figures of Nixon and George W. Bush.

It is remarkable that, in the career of Mitterrand as a candidate and as a President, he had the ability to make a marginal position work in his favour. Thus, appearing to be sidelined and unthreatening, Mitterrand on many occasions used the perceived weakness of his position to lever power or to use the opposition's force against itself. Mitterrand was adept at this political 'judo' in the Fourth Republic, in presidential campaigns, and in the Elysée.

François Mitterrand's political career at the top started in the Fourth Republic where, representing a constituency in the conservative part of the rural Nièvre, the young political figure made Catholic and conservative contacts, enabling his ascension in the more right-wing part of the Assembly. In an atmosphere of anti-communism and political intrigue, this was not particularly outstanding and not unusual. Mitterrand's positioning at the head of the small UDSR (Union démocratique et socialiste de la Résistance) political party that was a hinge group in the Assembly placed him in a favourable position for gaining ministerial portfolios (Duhamel 1996). Mitterrand's ministerial ascent started with the Veterans' Ministry, an area where he had cultivated relations and was supported by a network of former prisoners of war brought together under Vichy and at the end of the Second War under his auspices (Péan 1994).

In the use of the veterans' group, and the exploitation of the hinge position of the party in the Assembly (which Mitterrand eventually headed despite the priority of more senior members), Mitterrand demonstrated an ability to see the opportunities inherent in a minority position that would be evident - and crucial - later.

At this time, in the Fourth Republic, Mitterrand was a resolute defender of the French Empire but realised that these colonies could only be maintained if the metropolitan government pushed through reforms. Reforms were, of course, anathema to the allies that Mitterrand had on the right, and colonial reform rather than resistance to change was at that time (in the 1950s) the progressive or left-wing position. Mitterrand's initial colonialism moved him towards allies on the left and centre-left, and thus, by the early-1950s, this was the group with which Mitterrand was most associated (Duhamel 1998). By the mid-1950s, Mitterrand (and the UDSR) were seen as belonging to the centre-left and were depicted by the far right (settlers especially) as obstacles to French colonial policy (Duhamel 1998).

In 1956, the Algerian war began in earnest and the response of the left was uncertain; most of them hoped that reforms would pacify the situation. However, as Minister of the Interior, Mitterrand had apparently no qualms about prosecuting the war by whatever means were deemed necessary and - unlike some other politicians - remained in government in a key position as the conflict escalated (Storia and Malye 2010). This commitment to the cause of French Algeria was held against him by many on the left (including those in the small SFIO break-away the Parti socialiste unifié), but it did not do lasting damage. Mitterrand was clearly a potential minister, a '*ministre*' of the left, and a possible Prime Minister in the revolving door of governments that characterised the Fourth Republic. At the end of the Fourth Republic, Mitterrand's UDSR was clearly adapted to the alliance 'system' and its main figures were almost constantly in Cabinet positions. This was a result of the fragmentation of the political spectrum in the Assembly and of the exclusion of the extremes of left and right from the possible coalitions; a party system that Sartori has called 'polarised pluralism', a situation that multiplied the possibilities of office for the small parties like Mitterrand's UDSR (Sartori 1976).

A rally around the 'worst possible candidate' (Viansson-Ponté 1983, 398)

It was with the return of de Gaulle and the installation of the Fifth Republic that the phase in Mitterrand's career with which he is most

associated was instituted. In 1958, de Gaulle's Republic made two crucial differences to this regime of small parties, political deals and frequent changes of office holders. The first upheaval was that de Gaulle brought with him a new political elite (in main part from the Gaullist Resistance) and there was no place for the outsider Mitterrand in that system other than – possibly – as a junior or subordinate figure. Then there was the organisation into left and right blocs that consolidated around the presidency of de Gaulle, with the dominant Gaullist party on the one side and the mainly left-wing and centrist opposition on the other. Mitterrand's tiny UDSR would have little purchase on this new bipolar confrontation, although it remained a useful network.

Mitterrand was one of the first major figures to criticise the emergence of the executive presidency and, by virtue of that, went into the opposition of the left from 1958. Mitterrand's book *Le coup d'état permanent* on de Gaulle's system is intemperate and now outdated: particularly so because many of its criticisms of the presidentialism then emerging applied as much to 1980s presidential practice as they did to that of the 1960s. This pamphlet was, however, a vigorous and rhetorical attack on the new Gaullist Republic and its presidential nature, labeling it a 'dictatorship' (Mitterrand 1993, 87). However, Mitterrand was emerging as the most articulate critic of the regime and of de Gaulle, and as a particularly effective one. It was a polemic that established Mitterrand's credentials as a trenchant destroyer of the 'personal power' of the presidency that the republican left and centre disliked, and hence as a champion of republicanism. But at the same time, Mitterrand had recognised that the system had changed and that his position in the new disposition depended on making a role for himself in the divided left and against the newly established parties. On the face of it, this cavalier role would appear to have placed Mitterrand in a minority position, either marginalised or rejected, and in no position to make a new political career.

Yet at this time, immediately after the arrival of de Gaulle in power and whilst the Algerian War continued, two of Mitterrand's insights were crucial. One was that the presidential system was installed and would be a permanent feature of French politics, not, as many republicans and de Gaulle's opponents hoped, an aberration. This perception was not common on the left: the left's view of 'personal power' dated back to the Napoleonic *coup d'état*, and the mainstream parties had ideological difficulties in accepting the executive presidency. Those who had drafted the Fifth Republic constitution did not realise the use which de Gaulle would make of it, and many sought a return to the

non-executive Third and Fourth Republic presidencies. To an extent, this was a self-fulfilling mission: by bringing the left to support the new presidency, Mitterrand would reconcile the left to de Gaulle's institutions. In the new politics, the contest turned on the presidency and a minor figure (like Senator Alain Poher in 1969) would probably not win on a campaign run against the functioning of the Gaullist institutions.

Secondly, perhaps as important as a strategic insight, Mitterrand realised the importance of the Communist Party as a constituent of the opposition. This, in itself, was not that far-sighted. In the last elections of the Fourth Republic the Parti communiste français (PCF) had taken almost 25 per cent of the votes, and it had an organisation of unions, fronts, businesses and contacts that were unrivalled (possibly, Italy excepted) in the Western world. Its strength was also its problem. It had opposed, sometimes violently, the Fourth Republic, and its values were inimical to the left and centre-left represented by the mainstream parties (Courtois and Lazar 2000). But the need to treat with the Communist Party and to bring it into the opposition was recognised – the problem was how this could be accomplished without the opposition collapsing into a puppet front or a coalition of losing fragments. In main part, the answer was to build up a counter coalition to the PCF and then deal with it as a superior force, obliging it to accept conditions laid down to it (Cadiot 1994). Mitterrand's strategy was to recognise the PCF's legitimacy as a republican party and then to build on that dynamic to reinforce the centre-left – this 'alliance first' option was not an obvious choice and not without its dangers.

In this move, Mitterrand was aided by factors not within the control of a political figure, and not inside the Fifth Republic. In 1956, the Soviet leadership had decided, given the prevailing stalemate in Europe and the nuclear balance, that the 'Revolution' would take place in the Third World and that Western Europe would remain outside of the Soviet sphere. Western Communist parties were instructed to take the 'parliamentary route' to power and that meant seeking allies who would be on the left (turning Communist hostility to the Socialists on its head – not for the first time). This change in Communist line was to some extent occluded by the vigour with which it defended the Soviet invasion of Hungary and their opposition to the Algerian war. In the French Communist case, the integration of the PCF into the left opposition would be around a joint platform that would later materialise as the 'Common Programme'. Negotiation to agree a platform would therefore be imperative, and for the PCF, a *sine qua non* of engagement with the opposition.

Mitterrand, possibly aided by contacts made in the Resistance years, was able to appreciate this new 'parliamentary route' for what it was; because of this strategic (not ideological) stance, he came to be the herald of left-wing unity and was then identified as the guardian of the 'union of the left' alliance.

In 1965, Mitterrand had little to work with but this was made into a strength – this isolated figure from the tiny party of the centre-left and with few backers was not a threat to established political parties or leaders. With the Socialist Party (SFIO), the Communists' main target for alliance, suspended between different strategies, and Guy Mollet (its then leader) looking to return to a modest presidency, the only other figure who might rival Mitterrand was Mendès France (Ménager 1987). However, the single-minded Mendès France was not acceptable to the Communists and had in any case taken a high-minded, if politically suicidal, decision to boycott the executive presidency, which he regarded as ultra vires and non-republican. He was thus out of contention. Other figures, like Gaston Defferre, the mayor of Marseilles, who sought the SFIO's nomination, had imploded and a few centrist candidates who might have enabled the presidency to revert to modest origins were withdrawn. Moreover, Communist deputies had been humbled at the 1958 general elections, at which they were reduced to 10 seats. Communist Party managers wanted to give impetus to the alliance of the left but were hesitant about launching a Communist candidate who would (so it seemed at the time) be repudiated by an electorate still under the sway of de Gaulle (and which remembered the 1956 invasion of Hungary). Mitterrand, a figure promoting the alliance of the left, and an advocate of the integration of the Communists into alliance politics, would serve as a candidate but one who could be made to carry the can if, as seemed likely, the election proved a landslide for de Gaulle.

Mitterrand had also to overcome the curious 'affair of the Observatory' in 1959. In this incident, Mitterrand claimed to have been the victim of an assassination attempt and to have escaped by vaulting over the gates of the nearby Observatory park, but he was accused of having organised – or having been complicit in – a fake assassination. This affair also seemed to stamp Mitterrand indelibly as a discredited figure of little or no threat to the mainstream leaders. Perhaps, for this and other reasons, the SFIO leadership was later willing to support a candidate of the left from outside the Socialist ranks. In the weakened condition of the SFIO of the time, a presidential candidate (as Defferre had experienced) would pose a challenge to the leaders and would not be acceptable. Mitterrand, from outside, did not. Much of the organisational backbone

for Mitterrand's 1965 campaign was Communist, but because the Communist Party was willing to pay a high price for the prospect of a left-wing alliance, the eventual platform was very European and Atlanticist (*Le Monde*, 31 October – 1 November 1965). Nobody expected Mitterrand to win and few expected de Gaulle to be forced onto a second ballot run-off, and in consequence the platform was a 'loss-leader' not investigated in detail, and anything other than a drubbing would be hailed as a victory by the left.

Thus the left, Socialists and Communists, had a joint candidate in 1965 but one not initially expected to make an impact. In the outcome, Mitterrand's solid defeat in the 1965 presidential elections was seen as a quasi-victory. De Gaulle was forced onto a second ballot and the opposition (including some of the French Algeria die-hards) fell in behind the left's candidate. Although de Gaulle won easily in the run-off (55 per cent to 45 per cent), the momentum on the left was with Mitterrand who was able to bring together a 'shadow cabinet' of the centre-left in the National Assembly and promote the new opposition alliance of the left. This alliance was fragile and fell to pieces under the hammer blows of the May '68 student 'events' and the general strikes, as well as the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. Mitterrand, as more-or-less the leader of the opposition, took the blame for the defeat by the Gaullists in the 1968 general elections, which had been called to end the strikes and student disruption. De Gaulle had also been politically damaged by the 'events' of May '68, and in the referendum of 1969 was defeated and resigned. In the ensuing presidential elections, the Socialist Party candidate, Defferre, polled a derisory 5 per cent, and the centrist candidate, Alain Poher, who might have returned the presidency to its constitutional framework, was also defeated by the Gaullist, Georges Pompidou (see Chapter 6). It was also a confirmation of Mitterrand's view that the public approved of the executive presidency and would not choose to return to an old-style presidency of the Third or Fourth Republics.

But Mitterrand's insight, it has to be underlined, was strategic and not ideological. With the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the abrupt destruction of the 'Prague Spring' (as well as the PCF's highly indulgent acceptance of that intervention), the question of the totalitarian nature of the PCF came to the fore. A bit later, in 1969, in somewhat confused conditions, the old SFIO had been dissolved and a new Parti socialiste (PS) had been created. A logical consequence was the demand by the Socialist Party leadership (newly installed under First Secretary, Alain Savary) for clarification on what exactly the Communists' positions were. There began a series of abstract ideological discussions between

the newly founded Parti socialiste and the Communists. These, it soon became evident, were leading nowhere. From the Socialist Party point of view, it was even more troubling because the renovation of the 'Vieille maison' of the SFIO had not happened. No dynamic was evident, although some of the dusty cobwebs were being swept away.

Once again, Mitterrand, appearing as an outsider and as the head of a tiny group, moved to join the Parti socialiste at their 1971 Epinay Congress. Unknown to the First Secretary of the new party, the incomer had plotted a sweeping coup. In alliance with the big federations of the Nord and the Bouches du Rhône on (so it seemed) the right of the party, and the tiny left-wing CERES, Mitterrand managed to win a majority on the party's governing Directing Committee. Mitterrand joined the PS and within hours was made its leader (First Secretary), displacing Alain Savary and his supporters. Thus the PS had a new leader who was, crucially, of 'presidential timber', a *présidentiable*, and who had a strategy for attaining power – two things the old SFIO party had lacked. Once again, the momentum was with Mitterrand and he was able to use it to launch a further bid for the presidency.

Unlike many other leaders of parties in the same family, Mitterrand was able to surf the rising tide of the May '68 generation and to pick individuals out to staff the PS and to serve as his lieutenants. This ability to bring people into the team – although in subordinate positions – was a big part of Mitterrand's skill, and was evident in the network of veterans and in the UDSR. In the PS, a younger generation were the necessary new blood, but they were in position because of Mitterrand's authority rather than through their own force. This group of so-called 'sabres' expanded as the PS did and their authority grew with it, but never enough – in the early years – to challenge Mitterrand's leadership. Mitterrand's strategy involved a switching of alliances later at municipal level (to change the centrists for the Communist left) and the conclusion of the joint platform with the PCF (Cadiot 1994). In June 1972, a short time after the takeover of the PS, a 'Common Programme' platform for the general elections had been concluded with the PCF, and Mitterrand had finessed or negotiated most of the key issues (Bergounioux and Grunberg 1992). There were very few resignations from the Parti socialiste in Mitterrand's time, even though the SFIO had been run on unyielding anti-Communist principles, keeping the PCF out of positions of power in the 1950s and 1960s.

With an established party, capable of expanding and promoting the presidential candidate, and a new leadership group, the dynamic of unity on the left was to the benefit of the Parti socialiste. In 1965, the

same dynamic of alliance on the left had helped the SFIO but only to a small extent (unreformed as it was), and the PCF through its superior organisation had reaped the dividend of the alliance in increased membership and a few more Assembly seats. This was misleading, there was not much alternative in 1965, and may have helped push the PCF to conclude the Common Programme joint election manifesto in 1972 assuming that (as in 1936) they would again be the principal beneficiaries of the alliance. This new possibility of victory also concentrated minds on the right and centre, further accentuating the bipolar party system. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union began to have serious doubts about the utility of a strategy that would displace the Gaullist party and impose an avowedly Atlanticist and pro-European Mitterrand at the summit of the French state.

In fact, the 1973 general elections were won by the Gaullist majority and did not confirm the Parti socialiste as the major party on the left. Progress was being made by the PS but slowly, and the PCF still appeared to be satisfied with the alliance. Mitterrand's promotion of new lieutenants continued and the rebuilding of the PS was undertaken – though time was required. All the same, the position that Mitterrand held as the principal figure of the left-wing alliance and the left's *présidentiable* had taken root. There was no other challenger on the left.

However, Mitterrand was not given time. In 1974, President Pompidou died unexpectedly and the country faced presidential elections. This was the last time that the left was to be united. It was immediately evident that the Socialists and Communists would unite behind the 'natural' candidate of the left and the minor parties would follow in the slipstream. Mitterrand had a more-or-less free hand with the 1974 campaign, and the Communist Party was compliant, keeping its organisation intact but remaining discreet. On the Gaullist right there was confusion, but the centrist Finance Minister, Giscard d'Estaing, emerged as the right's standard bearer. This novelty was important because, although a minister in Gaullist governments, Giscard was not seen as a continuation of Gaullism, and deprived the challenger of an important theme. Giscard won the presidency by the narrowest of margins and inaugurated a septennate of divisions on the conservative right between centrists and Gaullists that ultimately proved destructive. For Mitterrand, it was a defeat that was a near victory; it confirmed Mitterrand at the head of the left alliance and provided the PS with new recruits, through both the election's attraction and the enlargement of the unified socialist left (Melchior 1993). Over three years, Mitterrand the newcomer had turned the sceptical Socialists into partisans of the

presidential system and the party into a vehicle for the launch of his candidacy. This transformation was accomplished by managing one of the most intricate political networks in France and, initially, doing so as a dispassionate observer who could see what could and could not be done and what had to be changed.

In the next few years, there followed a series of events that today are still not properly explained. They started with the attack on the Parti socialiste by the PCF after by-elections in which the Communist candidates had not performed well. This was a recognition by the PCF leaders that the alliance was benefiting the PS disproportionately and that the presidential campaign had not brought the expected gains and, with general elections next due in 1978, they may have calculated that a dispute could be countenanced without damaging electoral consequences. Perhaps also, the USSR had a hand in the disruption of relations on the left because the Mitterrand campaign had not been inflected leftward in the way that Soviet foreign policy specialists had hoped. French Communist relations with the USSR were not good at this time and the PCF made overtures to other parties in Western Europe (the Italian and Spanish Communist Parties) that were also seeking parliamentary power. For the Western Communists, this posed a problem: entering government required the repudiation of the USSR and that did not meet with Soviet approval. There were, therefore, symbolic demonstrations of independence without the fundamental changes that would be required of a Western-style party – this is the period of so-called ‘Eurocommunism,’ a presentational device in which the PCF also tried to compete with the Parti socialiste in ‘liberalism’ and innovation. For the PCF this ‘Eurocommunism’ did not bring electoral success.

In 1978, the general elections were held in an atmosphere of tension, and the PCF probably preferred defeat to a victory that disproportionately benefited the Socialist Party. There had been negotiations to update the ‘Common Programme’ but these had failed to reach agreement, and the PCF launched an outspoken attack on its erstwhile partners. Mitterrand continued emphasising the need for an alliance on the left – ‘*unitaire pour deux*’ – and, as the candidate supported by the PCF in two elections and the titular leader of the left, reinforced this message. It consolidated his position as the incarnation of the ‘union of the left’ and as the only plausible presidential candidate of the left. But the attacks on the PS had the immediate effect of saving the PCF’s position in the elections while sabotaging the expectations of victory for the left as a whole. There had been hopes for the left at these elections and the polls had made them the winners over several months. But the victory of the right concealed

an important development: the Parti socialiste was the biggest party on the left, surpassing the PCF by a small margin. This was a precondition for the victory of the alliance of the left and made the PS the ‘weather maker’, and placed its candidate in pole position.

If the PCF’s intent was to destroy or dominate the PS candidate, its strategy resulted in a severe setback. Discipline was not solid in the Communist ranks: there were several expulsions, the Paris Communist Party Federation was disbanded, and Marxist intellectuals took to the newspapers to express their discontent with the conduct of the PCF. Of course, this disaffection had happened before in Communist history, but the PCF was in a different situation: it had built up its main rival as the candidate of the left and it was thus trying to persuade its own supporters and voters that a mistake had been made and that the alliance with the PS was a dead end. This was not easy and was made more difficult by the PCF’s swing back to the orthodoxy of the world Communist movement supporting, for example, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the military coup by General Jaruzelski against Solidarity in Poland; none of this was of the nature to entice back a sceptical electorate and revive the Communist Party’s electoral fortunes.

Mitterrand’s persistence and symbolic status as the presidential representative of the ‘alliance of the left’ on two occasions gave him this very special stature and – as the PCF was to discover – was almost unattackable as the cause of disagreement. Yet this so-called ‘polemic’ did have its effect on the PS. Inside the party, the opposition came from the social democratic group around the rising figure of Michel Rocard. This was a challenge on two fronts – one ideological and the other personal. On a personal level, this was the first time a credible alternative candidate had emerged who was a national political figure. On an ideological level, the group challenged the unreality of the propositions in the ‘Common Programme’ and the nature of the alliance. This was a more serious threat to Mitterrand’s position than any previous move inside the PS or outside. Mitterrand chose to respond by reaffirming the need for an alliance of the left, and the programme was reconfirmed in its essentials.

Faced by attacks from both sides, questioning the strategy that he had devoted himself to since the beginning of the new Republic, Mitterrand’s position might have been fatal.

In fact, these attacks served to reinforce the position of the embattled central figure of the left. Increasingly intemperate Communist attacks on the leader of the left served to put Mitterrand in the central focus, to underline who was the key figure and also to remind voters that the Socialist Party was not under the tutelage of the PCF. On the other

side, the attacks by Rocard and the 'modernisers' inside the PS served to promote Mitterrand more forcefully as the indispensable figure in the Party (which was his vehicle and which was seen internally as such). Moreover, the attacks from Rocard, on the grounds that the joint manifesto of the Socialist and Communist Common Programme was 'unrealistic', put Mitterrand in the position of principal defender of the platform and of the alliance. If an '*alternance*' from right to left at national level was to take place, it could come through only one route – with Mitterrand as the essential guide. Rocard's challenge was effectively over when Mitterrand supporters retained control of the PS after their bitter and angry Congress of Metz in 1979. Mitterrand's control of the Party, ultimately determinant, envenomed the immediate situation. Rocard was the favourite in the opinion polls and decided to play on that popularity. Rocard's campaign continued in the hope that Mitterrand would concede the nomination to him and stand down.

Disjunctive leadership

On the conservative right, the split between the neo-Gaullist Rassemblement pour la République (RPR) led by Jacques Chirac and the centrist supporters of President Giscard had become envenomed to the point that the RPR was, as Leninists might put it, an 'objective ally' of the Socialist leader (with what tacit understanding is still an unknown). President Giscard's centre and Gaullist coalition was fracturing badly in the late 1970s and the dispute was exacerbated by personal clashes and difficulties in passing legislation through the Assembly. There was a *fin de règne* look to the conservative coalition that fits with Skowronek's portrayal of 'disjunction' (Skowronek 1999, 39–41). 'Disjunction' is a situation in which the sitting President inherits commitments and makes responses that are no longer appropriate and the coalition falls apart. In this case, the Gaullist-centrist coalition, which had run the Fifth Republic since de Gaulle's victory in 1958, was badly split. In retrospect, the divisions look so deep that nothing could have guaranteed the President a second term and it was time for '*alternance*', a change of majority from right to left.

This continuing dispute between the wings of the Parti socialiste had the effect of making President Giscard's re-election appear a simple affair, given that the same divisions between the 'Common Programme' partners had prevented a victory by the left in 1978. However, public opinion was distracted by the internal struggles and only consolidated when they were resolved – in the case of the Parti socialiste that

resolution came quickly when Mitterrand decided once again to run in the autumn of 1980 before the presidential elections and Rocard stood aside. In the Communist case, their attacks on Mitterrand continued well into the 1981 campaign and made the PCF appear to be running against the Socialist candidate as much as against the outgoing President. Given Mitterrand's prominent position and commanding support from the non-Communist left, the PCF's leader and its candidate Georges Marchais failed to hold a fragmenting electorate, and lost votes to Mitterrand. Thus the years as the candidate of the left promoting 'change', raising hopes very high, and as the Communists' preferred candidate, provided winning impetus to the third presidential campaign by Mitterrand. In the subsequent dissolution of the Assembly, the presidential 'coat-tails' effect gave the Parti socialiste the majority in the Assembly on its own (aided in good part, it has to be noted, by demobilisation on the right and by differential abstention). Both the Communists and the internal Socialist Party ('Rocardian') opposition to Mitterrand in the PS were sidelined.

Although the Parti socialiste's position in the Assembly was dominant and needed no bolstering, the new President Mitterrand gave minor portfolios to four Communists in the new government. This was in keeping with Mitterrand's commitment to the alliance of the parties of the left. Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy's second government formed, after the general elections, which included Communist ministers and some centre-left Radicals and a few independents, could be seen as the first government of left-wing unity in the republic's history. In 1936, the PCF did not take up the offer of government posts; in the 1945 governments there were three major parties (including the Christian Democrat Mouvement républicain populaire – MRP); and in the 1950s, the SFIO did not ally with the Communists. This incorporation of its ministers made the PCF, from the start, complicit in the government's actions including a firm commitment to the Atlantic Alliance and a series of tough decisions affecting the Communist heartlands. These four posts were not sensitive or major ministries, but they were as much as the PCF could hope for in the circumstances – possibly in the expectation that things would turn against the government and that the party could have one foot inside and one outside. In the event, the Communist Party was pulled by its base away from the direction that (eventually) the government travelled, and they were unable to demonstrate their effect on government policy; they were involved in decisions but, as with coalition politics elsewhere, were unable to say in what way it had been inflected as a result of their pressure.

All the Socialist faction leaders had their place in the Cabinet, although some had more prominence than others (Rocard was parked at the Planning Ministry). Socialist internal settlements continued well after the election with the eviction of Rocard's supporters in many places and the reinforcement of the Socialist Party machine to Mitterrand's benefit. Mitterrand's lieutenants had been put in charge of the PS and this continued after the election with the new First Secretary (Lionel Jospin) deriving authority from his position as Mitterrand's placeman – not as an independent figure. Although Jospin was the First Secretary, the party internally was dominated by Mitterrand who regularly brought together the Socialist Party's grandees, controlled the internal organisation and oversaw the nominations. Other politicians in the government began to make their authority felt and this provided a counterpoint to the expected façade of unity. In the immediate aftermath of the 1981 elections, the euphoria was such that the overall political project was not contested, factionalism was stifled and the conservative opposition was temporarily silenced during a brief presidential 'honeymoon'.

However, the wave of euphoria was unsustainable and the platform to be implemented was too ambitious. A set of expectations had been raised and the ensuing disappointment led to plunging popularity in the polls. There followed a decline in support followed by a defeat at general elections, '*cohabitation*' and then a revival at the 1988 presidential elections when the same process repeated itself. But in 1981, Pierre Mauroy, who had helped ease Mitterrand into the leadership of the party, became the Prime Minister of a government with an extensive agenda of reforms (Hoffmann and Ross 1988). These included a long list of nationalisations (banks, industrial groups and steel) as well as a shorter working week, Auroux laws on workplace relations, and in the economy a 'dash for growth'. This government's list of social reforms was also extensive and ran through the entire shape of French society, from decentralisation measures to the modernisation of the media.

There was a general expectation that the new government would impel the reanimation of the economy, through increased intervention and consumption, as the method of reducing unemployment and increasing livings standards; but this reflation ran against the trend of European and Western deflation. Voices were raised against this course and from inside the government, Finance Minister Delors, by calling for a 'pause' in the rate of reforms in November 1981, made doubts clear. As the balance of payments got worse, Delors called for a restriction on spending, and there were two devaluations of the franc between June 1982 and March 1983. By March 1983 the debt problem and the runs

on the franc had made the economic situation untenable and other voices were now heard, especially that of the Prime Minister, demanding a change of course. Mitterrand hesitated but, given the weight of testimony calling for austerity or '*rigueur*', conceded and the 'dash for growth' ended with an austerity programme designed to control inflation and restore public finances, the balance of payments and the stability of the franc in the European system of linked currencies – the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM). This was presented as a 'decision for Europe', although the drastic go-it-alone 'Albanian solution' of withdrawing from the ERM had been entertained and Mitterrand appeared to hesitate until the last minute.

A U-turn of this nature was, as expected, punished with social upheaval and poor opinion poll ratings: Mitterrand's personal popularity was then the lowest for a President of the Fifth Republic, and Prime Minister Mauroy became as unpopular. There were still four Communists in the government, but the PCF's political support was badly affected by lay-offs and unemployment. If it was Mitterrand's intention to reinvigorate the left with a new attempt to integrate the church schools into the state system, this went wildly wrong and the government faced massive demonstrations in June 1984. Prudently, the measure was withdrawn but not without a futile attempt to throw some of the opprobrium onto the right-wing Senate majority. For Mauroy, and the disowned Education Minister, Alain Savary, this was the end of the adventure, and the government resigned. Thus ended the Communist participation in government, and the PCF with its satellite CGT unions moved to a more determined and direct hostility although they had supported both the dash for growth and the cutbacks in the deflation of 1983 (Courtois and Lazar 2000). A more prudent time for the PCF to leave might have been in 1983, before taking responsibility for the turn to austerity – '*rigueur*'. It was the end of the union of the left but also of the Communist Party's hegemonic position on the French left: Communists' fortunes continued on a sawtooth decline.

In 1984, with two years to go before the next general elections, Mitterrand nominated a new government led by Laurent Fabius and including 'consensus' and modernising figures (such as Rocard, and in departments such as Education or Agriculture where things had become confrontational). This was a new beginning, symbolised by the Prime Minister Fabius (then only 38), under the banner of 'modernisation' and economic competitiveness. However, this was a difficult remit and there was haste to make an impact. It was disrupted by 'events' mostly of the government's own making. In June 1985, the Prime Minister

and PS First Secretary publicly rowed about who should lead the election campaign. In July, the Greenpeace Affair (the sinking of a boat by French agents in Auckland harbor) damaged the government, and although the Defence Minister Hernu resigned, the disruption was considerable. In October, Fabius's poor showing in a debate with Jacques Chirac – when a fatigued Prime Minister managed to show Chirac in a sympathetic light – further undermined the government's standing in the polls. This blow to the government's prestige was followed by the Prime Minister's disavowal of a meeting between the President and the Polish dictator, General Jaruzelski, in December 1985, and that in turn meant that the situation could not be retrieved. All that could be done in the time remaining was to limit the damage to the party in the upcoming elections. Mitterrand had changed the electoral system to a form of proportional representation and this absolved the Socialist Party of the need to ally with the PCF, limited the conservative right's gains and enabled the Front national (then a rising force) to enter the Assembly as a disruptive and divisive force. In the 1986 general elections, the PS polled 32 per cent, but well below the conservative right; they had no allies, and for the '*cohabitation*' of 1986–8 the Socialist Party depended on the President.

The uses of adversity

President Mitterrand is the only French President to have completed two septennates and the last (given the change in the Constitution) who will do so. This statistical uniqueness conceals what was in effect two five-year terms of executive office, 1981–6 and 1988–93, and two '*cohabitations*' during which the President was reduced to ceremonial roles and deprived of real power. Mitterrand was the first to undergo this '*cohabitation*' experience in the Fifth Republic (Lacouture 1988). '*Cohabitation*' is the term (journalistic and not constitutional) describing a Fifth Republic President of one side and an Assembly, Prime Minister and government of the other (Cohendet 1993). In this case, it was President Mitterrand of the left and a government, led by the RPR leader Jacques Chirac, of the right. A defeat at the polls had been well signalled in advance and the left had time to prepare for a President isolated in the Elysée with no levers other than informal ones to work. Mitterrand, blustering somewhat, stated that he had every intention of exercising the presidential role fully although this, in legal terms, was minimal.

This, ostensibly ceremonial, position enabled Mitterrand to associate himself with the achievements of the government while dissociating

himself from their mistakes, and use the internal splits and disagreements in the government as a weapon. Because the presidency was the prize that Prime Minister Chirac sought, the post holder could not be humiliated and the President held his representative function. Chirac's impetuous drive to establish himself fully as the leader of the right (his ambition to be President was never disguised) and to place himself in winning position for the 1988 presidential elections, led to hasty and costly errors. There were two years of '*cohabitation*' and only the President could shorten that term. There was not enough time for a new Prime Minister and RPR party to establish themselves as the dominant force in a divided coalition. Mitterrand had to wait and to take advantage of the inevitable problems that the government would meet.

There were disagreements over the settlement in New Caledonia, set aside by the new government, although there had been serious tension between the indigenous population and the French settlers. Later, New Caledonia was to be the setting for further social upheaval and a hostage-taking as the Pacific island became further disturbed. The President also refused to sign laws passed by the Cabinet in the summer of 1986, some privatising state industries. Although this blockage was easily evaded by the government using the majority in the Assembly, it dramatised the different outlooks. Causes of quarrels were picked with care because the public did not appreciate disagreement at the summit of the state and punished (in the polls) those held responsible. There was, however, the University reform proposal of the autumn 1986 ('*loi Devaquet*'), which provoked student protests and which led to the death of one protester. These were followed shortly after by strikes in the SNCF and a partial shutdown. President Mitterrand, indirectly and not in a direct disavowal of the government, displayed sympathy with the strikers and with the student cause (this was aided by Socialist sympathising groups: '*Tiens bon Ton Ton*'). As '*cohabitation*' President in office, Mitterrand was well placed to set himself above the party divisions and portray himself as a unifier of the nation and the social pacifier. President Mitterrand's popularity rose as that of the Prime Minister's fell, and he had the message, and the role as consensus maker and pacifier in social affairs, for a campaign to win a second term.

Return to normality?

Social cohesion and harmony were thus the message in the presidential address, *Lettre à tous les français*, that served as Mitterrand's platform in 1988. This was a fluid and general statement of purpose but was a

remake, shifting the President's persona from the left's champion to that of the 'father of the nation'. In keeping with Mitterrand's turn from the personification of left-wing unity (and a historic defeat of the centre-right), the message became conciliatory and consensual. In this the figure of Michel Rocard, who had promoted a moderate social democracy against the caustic socialism of the Parti socialiste over many years, was called on to lend support to the beleaguered President. Mitterrand retained the advantage of being President until more or less the last possible moment. It was a short but effective campaign in 1988 stressing the presidential authority of the incumbent and, in a few weeks that were not without acrimony, the need for a return to a Socialist government. Mitterrand defeated his Prime Minister by 54 per cent to Jacques Chirac's 46 per cent. This was a resounding victory and a dissolution of the Assembly followed immediately but, of course, Mitterrand's poll triumph had to be turned, for the Socialist Party, into a majority of Assembly seats.

Michel Rocard had, once again, supported Mitterrand's bid for the presidency and scrapped his own campaign to aid that of the President. This time, the general elections, after the dissolution following the presidential elections, were less successful, and the Parti socialiste won only a relative majority and could be defeated if, for example, the Communist Party voted a motion of no confidence. In keeping with the general pattern, Mitterrand nominated Rocard as Prime Minister expecting (possibly) that this would unmake his rival's reputation (Lacouture 1988; 308 ff.). A peculiar coexistence started between the President and a Prime Minister who had had presidential ambitions and who had complicated Mitterrand's early tenure as First Secretary and opposition leader in the 1970s. Mitterrand repudiated any alliance with the centre and was to use his new-found position as 'father of the nation' to make his displeasure with Rocard's actions known in social conflicts. This was evident, for example, in the schools movement of November 1990, when the President stated his displeasure. On occasion, Mitterrand was acting as if the Prime Minister was not his choice. He also surrounded Rocard with 'Mitterrandist' ministers in Cabinet, and decreed changes in government policy.

Rocard, in this situation of minority government, was obliged to use 'variable geometry' majorities in the Assembly – not easy to manage – but piloted some radical measures, including the new '*contribution sociale généralisée*' tax, through a wary Assembly. Another settlement was concluded in New Caledonia and was endorsed by referendum. Other reforms were sent through the Assembly in a record of legislative

activity that was impressive, if not appreciated as much by the President. Mitterrand's grip began to fail as he was beginning to feel the impact of age and of his (secret) illness. It was also Mitterrand's last term and he began to suffer the effects of the 'lame duck' as political figures began to look to the next in line. Moreover, Rocard's presidential ambitions led him to promote his faction in the Parti socialiste.

President Mitterrand's limits were evident immediately after the elections of 1988. A new Socialist Party leader would inherit the vehicle for a presidential bid and Mitterrand preferred Fabius as First Secretary: the Party chose former Premier, Pierre Mauroy. Mitterrand had had trouble in imposing a settlement in the Socialist Party during Mauroy's tenure as First Secretary in 1988, and this had led to a factional struggle of imposing dimensions. At the Congress of Rennes in 1990, Rocard joined with Jospin to block Fabius (supported by Mitterrand) from the party leadership. They were, however, unable to prevail against Mitterrand's determination that the Socialist Party would remain in friendly hands. Rocard would have been dismissed had the Gulf War not intervened. Although Rocard was not 'in the loop' of the Gulf War decision-making process, a change of Prime Ministers at that time would not have been prudent. Rocard, despite three years of tenure of the Hôtel Matignon, was asked to resign in May 1991. Rocard then continued to campaign for the presidential nomination outside of government.

This enforced 'resignation' was not appreciated by a public which regarded Rocard in a favourable light; and his replacement, Edith Cresson, proved not up to the job. Yet in May 1991, with the appointment of Edith Cresson, left wing and combative, as France's first woman Prime Minister, it looked as if Mitterrand as the 'prince of equivocation' had carried out another unorthodox move – or '*coup de Jarnac*' (Northcutt 1992). In fact, Cresson was isolated and unable to prevail against the factional powers then dominating the PS, and part of Mitterrand's intention had been to eliminate the Rocardians, which meant that the President's supporters were returned in a more-or-less unchanged Cabinet. Within that Cabinet, the priority was with the Finance Minister, Pierre Bérégovoy, who had a hand in all departmental decisions and who emerged very rapidly as a commanding figure. Cresson's habit of speaking extempore caused troubles (largely as a purveyor of gaffes), but the decisions to decentralise government offices and to restructure education policy ran up against entrenched interests. On the last point, the teachers' union (FEN) was a stronghold of the Socialists – and had been for many years – and the Education Minister, Lionel Jospin, was alert to this threat. Thus, President Mitterrand was

forced to intervene to shore up a failing Prime Minister. In April 1992, after a severe setback at the regional elections (at which the PS took only 18 per cent), Cresson had to resign.

Pierre Bérégovoy, Minister of Finance, who believed he should have been nominated Premier in 1991, was then nominated Prime Minister but faced an economic downturn and had only one year to general elections which were signalled as an impending defeat. Moreover, Socialist politics was unravelling after 10 years of the double septennate, with funding scandals, improper exercise of power, and failures of policy or administration. In September 1992, the referendum on the European Maastricht Treaty failed to reanimate the left (if that was its intention), and the 'yes' prevailed by the very slight margin of 51 per cent (but with an abstention rate of 30 per cent). Pierre Bérégovoy was then assailed by a scandal (having borrowed from a financial associate to buy a house) and seemed to symbolise the corruption endemic in the party funding mechanisms of the time. There was, in the general elections of March 1993, another rout of the Parti socialiste at the polls; the PS took only 19 per cent, touching its lowest point, and major figures like Rocard and Jospin lost their seats. Pierre Bérégovoy (so it was reported) took the criticism very personally and committed suicide on 1 May of that year.

In 1993, the '*cohabitation*' was of a different order to that of 1986–8. Unlike in 1986, the Socialist Party had been humbled as a political force, and Mitterrand had no intention of standing again. In addition, there was doubt as to Mitterrand's state of health, to the extent that some said that finishing the septennate may have been optimistic (Gubler and Gonod 1996). The new conservative RPR Prime Minister, Édouard Balladur, had a more subtle approach to the Presidency and had no intention of humiliating an outgoing President, as Jacques Chirac had tried to do in 1986–8. There were disagreements; the President marked his political existence with indirect criticisms, and the Prime Minister took advantage of the situation to claim responsibility for political victories (in the GATT negotiations, for example).

Mitterrand used the years after 1993 (when the Socialist Party was out of government) to put his record into the public domain, disclosing his 'secret' family and the youthful engagement with the Vichy regime. He did this ensuring that, at least, some of the process would be controlled.

Conclusion

To return to the original formulation, Mitterrand's political artistry is evident throughout his political life, but is of a different category to de

Gaulle's. There are problems of success and succession in the Mitterrand double septennate. Mitterrand's successor had not been manoeuvred into place, and Rocard, at that time First Secretary of the PS, was undermined even though the Parti socialiste was not then in a position to find and impose a credible contender for the 1995 presidential elections. Mitterrand had found the Socialist Party in ruins and left it in ruins. Mitterrand had been the candidate and then the President of the united left but there had only been a short four years of government on that basis. After 1984, when the PCF quit government, the presidency depended on shifting alliances and expedient majorities (this did not work badly). Mitterrand had used the instruments of politics that fell to hand.

This was not the artistry displayed by de Gaulle, who had constructed the political framework for future generations; it was essentially conservative. Where others might have developed a pedagogical role 'teaching reality' (Hargrove 1998, 42–6) this was eschewed and the French left pursued its traditional course. It was left to others to rebuild.

To use Skowronek's formulation again, the Socialist-led coalition was in a phase of 'disjunction': it had run its course and a new grouping would have to be constructed by later leaders (Skowronek 1999). With a party denuded of '*présidentiables*' and weakened by scandals and the exercise of power, Mitterrand's immediate legacy to the party was not impressive. There were 'dauphins' (too many at one point) and plausible candidates but no party organisation capable of imposing a solution. When Mitterrand left office in 1995, the party had to be rebuilt and Jospin, the new candidate, had to undertake the rebuilding at the same time as running for the presidency (Safran 2000).

Mitterrand's poor state of health had been concealed from the public, and from many of his close colleagues who were unaware of the extent of the debilitating condition. This meant that the last few months of Mitterrand's life were sequestered away in infirmity. Notwithstanding, there were meetings with journalists, writers and friends in the seclusion of an apartment set aside for the former Head of State. Mitterrand's long career in political life was opened to interrogation by chosen (but not uncritical) interlocutors.

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9 Jacques Chirac: Surviving without Leading?

Andrew Knapp

Jacques Chirac was elected President on 7 May 1995, with a comfortable 52.64 per cent of the vote against his Socialist opponent, Lionel Jospin. His victory completed a spectacular reconquest of France's institutions by the right. In 1993, Chirac's Gaullist party, the Rassemblement pour la République (RPR), with its coalition partners of the Union pour la démocratie française (UDF), had won the right's biggest ever National Assembly majority – 472 out of 557 seats. Yet within two years of his election to the presidency, Chirac had lost the means to govern France. Using his powers under Article 12 of the Constitution to dissolve the National Assembly and call new elections, he was rewarded with a left-wing victory and obliged to appoint Jospin as Prime Minister. The two men would 'cohabit' at the head of France's executive for five years; Jospin's government would make France's domestic policy.

On 5 May 2002, Chirac was re-elected to the presidency with 82.15 per cent of the vote against Jean-Marie Le Pen, who had beaten Jospin to the run-off ballot by 200,000 votes. More than any of his predecessors, Chirac that evening could be viewed as 'President of all the French', having attracted the support, however reluctant, of millions of left-wing voters. Six weeks later, on 16 June, the Union pour une majorité présidentielle (UMP), the party he had fashioned out of the RPR and most of the UDF, won a comfortable National Assembly majority with 369 seats; by the year's end it would hold a single-party majority in the Senate as well. Yet in May 2005 Chirac was once again reduced to lame-duck status as his referendum on the European Constitutional Treaty was rejected by a No vote of 54.7 per cent. His presidency never recovered. The election of Nicolas Sarkozy, Interior Minister and UMP leader, to succeed Chirac in May 2007 brought the curtain down on a second term widely viewed as a failure.