Introduction: politics and grandeur

Everything begins with mysticism and ends with politics.

Péguy

The foreign policy of France during the years when de Gaulle was the last Prime Minister of the dying Fourth Republic (June–December 1958) and the first President of the Fifth Republic (January 1959–April 1969) had a considerable impact on world politics of the day. It challenged – and occasionally broke – the rules of the game which had been established in the late 1940s and which had set hard in the 1950s. It enraged its opponents at home and abroad, yet it was not revolutionary. It did not spare the status quo; yet it did not seek to destroy the entire existing balance of world power, only to modify that balance.

It was far-sighted, in that it was built upon a vision of a post-cold war world, in which the mature nations of the old world and the newly independent states of the Third World would act to counterbalance the political, economic, technological and military hegemony of the two recently emerged ‘superpowers’, the United States and the Soviet Union, and to loosen the strait-jacket of the nuclear balance of terror. But also, especially with the hindsight of the 1970s, it appears as insufficient, in that it was rooted in a world where the industrialised countries were still reinforcing their economic dominance, when economic growth was high and inflation low, and when global power seemed to be all of a piece – not fragmented, as it is today, into complex circuits of military, economic, cultural and political relationships in which resources are often not commensurate with influence. This was the world before the major upheavals symbolised by the 1973 Yom Kippur War and the quadrupling of petroleum prices which followed, bringing with it a world recession and a painful period of adjustment which has yet to crystallise into a long-term structure of global political relations.

Politically, the world of Camp David is poles apart from that preceding and following the Six-Day War in 1967; that of Angola,
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Mozambique and Zimbabwe from that of post-independence Africa in the sixties; that of the ‘German problem’ since the Ostpolitik from that of the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961.

De Gaulle’s foreign policy, however, was not defined only by the structure of international relations or by his view of them in isolation. Rather, it was part of a much wider view of man and his world, an ontological perspective on the ‘nature of things’ which gave coherence to his political action and linked the various facets of his foreign and domestic policies when in power. Janus-like, Gaullist foreign policy has two complementary faces. The first face looks outward to the rest of the world. This was de Gaulle the revisionist, seeking to shake free of cold war constraints and to use to the maximum those capabilities which France possessed to push the reluctant superpowers to recognise that a world of detente would necessarily be a world in which smaller nations’ freedom of action and manoeuvre would increase, not decrease, and in which the superpowers themselves would have to shed their ideological pretensions and accept greater limits to their own activity.

The second face looks inward to France, and sees foreign policy as an issue-area among the others. This was de Gaulle the symbolic leader, the founder of a new constitutional order based on a strong and stable executive power, and the guardian of the liturgy of national interest in a country which he saw as historically divided, politically weak, and yet culturally strong, economically ambitious and potentially ‘great’ – even in a world which it could not, and did not seek to, dominate.

It is the link between these two faces which this book aims to explore. That they were linked has been widely recognised. But the actual substance and content of that link – the underlying ideas, aspirations and goals which gave shape and force to de Gaulle’s political action at home and abroad – have never been examined in depth. Polemics have abounded, viewpoints have clashed, and oversimplified stereotypes have been accepted by all too many writers. Words – in particular, the ‘key word’ with which this study begins: grandeur – have been bandied about, occasionally with insight, but rarely with any extended analysis.

Naturally, this has led to misunderstandings and misconceptions, which this book will try to put into perspective and, hopefully, to correct. By integrating the occasional insights of the more perspicacious observers of the General with a philosophical exegesis of de Gaulle’s writings and speeches and with a sociological and cultural examination of the setting of de Gaulle’s politics and foreign policy, a new synthesis, based upon a new interpretation of the significance of Gaullist policy, is
developed. It is hoped here to elaborate and elucidate not only the ideological roots of Gaullist policy but also its operational psychological environment – the day-to-day context in which short-term and medium-term goals were set, statements were issued, resources were mobilised, threats from the outside were perceived and structures were evolved in practice.

In doing this we build up not only a new interpretation of de Gaulle’s foreign policy *per se* but also an analytical framework within which Gaullist policy can be compared with wider trends characteristic of foreign policy and ‘nation-building’ in the contemporary world. At a second level the book goes on to examine some of the practical implications of this reappraisal, looking at the way the ideological environment affected Franco-American relations in the sixties, and at the domestic impact of de Gaulle’s foreign policy on political life within France.

*The idea of grandeur*

The notion of *grandeur* has been seen by most observers as the embodiment of General de Gaulle’s hopes and aspirations for his beloved France. That France should be great, that the potential for greatness is written in her history and present in the spirit of her culture, and that it ought to be the inspiration of her politics also, was at the core of that ‘certain idea of France’ which he formed at an early age and carried with him throughout his career.

In an analytical sense, too, *grandeur* – as a normative concept – has been used by de Gaulle’s supporters and critics alike as a shorthand for summarising the ideological content of Gaullist foreign policy. That is how we intend to use it here. It is a highly evocative word in the minds of both proponents and opponents of Gaullist policy, and in trying to get to the heart of de Gaulle’s own meaning of the term, it provides not only a convenient starting-point, but also an image which contains within itself its own peculiar reality. As Kenneth Boulding has written, ‘we must recognise that the people whose decisions determine the policies and actions of nations do not respond to the “objective” facts of the situation, whatever that may mean, but to their “image” of the situation.’ *Grandeur*, which is a complex term with several meanings and connotations at the best of times, thus becomes a condensation symbol for a wide range of stimuli and responses which form a complex value system.

We must, then, go beyond the word itself to the entire social and
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political context of its use, to the nexus at which structure and perception meet both conscious action and social behaviour. As Murray Edelman has demonstrated, language must not be understood as something which ‘conveys meaning by itself’; rather, the meanings of words are ‘always a function of the context from which it [language] issues, and of their respective modes of perception’. We cannot be satisfied with the words themselves, but must seek to examine the way diverse audiences respond to those words (and groups of words) in a wide range of social settings. Thus any analysis of *grandeur* must proceed by following a number of different trails.

We start from the hypothesis that the purpose of de Gaulle’s foreign policy was not the attainment of glory and power for France for its own sake. Rather, *grandeur* refers primarily to the need to create a new and more profound sense of national consciousness, capable of transcending the traditional divisions which have characterised the French polity, thus allowing and reinforcing the development of a consensus supportive of a firmly established and active state pursuing the general interest, within a stable political system. In developing this hypothesis, we start from an analysis of de Gaulle’s own value system and explicit political thinking, in both their cultural roots and their textual manifestations. Thus we are able to probe the wider implications which flow from the explicit and implicit assumptions and postulates of de Gaulle’s ideological *Weltanschauung*. We explore the ways in which this worldview shaped de Gaulle’s approach to political activity itself – how he saw the nature of leadership and the prospects for personal action – and how this activity can be located within both the French national tradition and the pattern of forces in world politics today.

In this context, most of the labels which have been used to describe this approach are inadequate. *Grandeur* is a symbolic term, meant to signify a certain conception of the general interest, and this, in turn, implies a foreign policy which is not one of aggressive and anachronistic nationalism, but rather a restrained attempt to increase France’s role in the world without taking unacceptable risks and without destroying the basis for an interdependence which is as necessary for the survival and development of the national community as is independence. This search for a larger role does, however, require a more flexible system of international relations, oriented towards the post-cold war emergence of nationalism as a major force in contemporary world affairs.

In examining the Atlantic Question in more detail, ways are suggested of reinterpreting the ‘facts’ through the frame of reference built
up in the first half of the book and showing how our reappraisal works in practice. Here we find more evidence that, for de Gaulle, grandeur was a qualitative, not a quantitative, concept, and that, as a consequence, the Franco-American conflict of the sixties appears in a rather different light. French goals were essentially symbolic and did little to alter the substantive power relationship between France and the United States; however, in wounding American amour-propre and in undermining her self-image of altruistically taking on the burdens incumbent upon her as the ‘vanguard of the free world’, de Gaulle aroused that deep resentment in the United States which stemmed from the loss of face and status and which, in another theatre of American foreign policy, was dragging her deeper and deeper into the Vietnam conflict. The impact of this reaction upon French public opinion was, in fact, to enhance de Gaulle’s image and to further his pursuit of national legitimacy for the Fifth Republic and its institutions and processes. And once his symbolic goals had been achieved by means of withdrawing from NATO and the expulsion of American troops from France, relations were rapidly normalised on a bilateral basis. Indeed, although some of the content of French foreign policy has altered since de Gaulle’s retirement in 1969 and death in 1970, the presidentialist style and symbolic primacy of the assertion of French independence and grandeur have become institutionalised.

It is worth noting, in advance, some limitations which affect our use of the word grandeur. In the first place, the word contains significant internal distinctions in its definition and connotation. It can mean, in French, anything from simple measurable size or ‘bigness’, through a sort of ‘grandness’ with connotations of the extensiveness of the influence, power or glory associated with a particular social, political or cultural phenomenon, to a much more profound sense of transcendental moral or cultural value or worthiness. The English usage of the term is usually restricted to the second of these three senses, and distortions appear in the comprehension of Gaullist aspirations in the eyes of British and American observers as a result of this perceptual gap. De Gaulle’s hopes for French ‘greatness’, for example, are often interpreted as rather primitive ‘dreams of glory’ or ‘delusions of grandeur’. In the historical personage of Napoleon I the three meanings are most clearly present at the same time. The size of the Empire, the trappings of glory, the extensiveness and intensiveness of French socio-cultural influence on the conquered territories, the very power of France in terms of military capabilities, and the revolutionary moral and philosophical
nature of the French ‘message’, are all summed up in the over-arching image of grandeur. Both domestic and foreign observers still look upon the First Empire as a significant paradigmatic epoch for understanding the historical development of French society and politics.

The Gaullist conception of grandeur, we shall argue, is a much more restricted phenomenon. In fact, it will appear from these pages as a limitationist ideology, concerned with the search for internal moral unity and worthiness in such a way that these objectives act as a restraint on both internal domestic fragmentation and external aggressiveness and international disequilibrium. Although it has often been pointed out that the Gaullist notion of grandeur was a significant symbolic force for the creation of domestic stability and a sense of national identity, only Jean-Baptiste Duroselle claims, as we shall do, that ‘even such “politics of greatness” will have an ultimate domestic purpose’, which is precisely ‘to preserve French unity’; this comment comes only, however, by way of an aside.

It follows from this assertion that if ‘vast enterprises’ are conceived mainly as having a domestic purpose, surely the enterprises themselves ought not to be so grandiose as to upset the international system in such a way as to cause other states to attempt to injure France, especially in a world which is highly interdependent and in which French economic and military capabilities are limited. French politics, with this shift of perspective, becomes a dialectic of assertion and conciliation, of revisionism and satisfaction, the purpose of which is to protect and nurture the development of French society and to encourage the development of a global order which will make this possible. Through a combination of exhortation and limited (mainly symbolic) pressure, de Gaulle sought to support and reinforce structural tendencies which he saw as already being present and even inherent in the international system. Chief among these perceived tendencies was the development of an explicitly articulated awareness of the central role of the ‘national interest’ (itself a function of the domestic ‘general interest’) in creating a viable basis for the peaceful settling of differences in the international arena. His international revisionism was a function of his aspirations for the cultural and social integration and development of the French people by means of a common purpose, and not the other way round.

The real significance of de Gaulle's idea of grandeur is, then, as a symbol, and not as a means to extend French power. It should be seen as a cultural norm, applicable both to domestic French politics and to the
moral authority of France in the world. It does not readily fit into the standard paradigms of international relations, whether in terms of power politics – what O’Leary has called the ‘billiard ball school’⁴ – or in terms of systems theory. It is, in many respects, sui generis.⁵ This study will not, however, limit itself to an examination of Gaullism as a deviant case. In fact, our main purpose will be to suggest that Gaullist foreign policy represents a particular structured set of analytical categories – what we call a ‘syndrome’ – which is characteristic of many states in the contemporary world.

There is also a second major limitation on an analysis of grandeur. This concerns not so much the content of the idea, but rather its usage. Grandeur is but one of a number of words which make up the complex structure of Gaullist ideology, and in this sense our use of it as an overarching analytical concept is clearly artificial or conventional. In his little collection of de Gaulle’s sayings, French journalist Jean Lacouture makes clear the limitations in his very brief section ‘On Grandeur’. Although, he observes, we might expect to find this key word ‘everywhere in the Gaullien literature’, it has, in fact, become rare; other words, such as independence, have become more frequent alternatives.⁶ Lacouture himself, regarding grandeur as the key word for de Gaulle, ascribes this decline in its usage to a combination of confusion and dissimulation on de Gaulle’s part. Thus we can see that, for both Gaullists and anti-Gaullists, the use of the term demands the introduction of a preconception. It is a value-loaded word which reaches its hearers by way of their own conceptions of what it already means for them. Thus we are in that analytical twilight zone where a concept loaded both in the minds of diverse audiences and in de Gaulle’s own mind, must be broken down into its empirical elements in a context where the word itself is less observably utilised than intuitively inferred.

Despite these qualifications, however, it is clearly indispensable to use an overarching concept such as grandeur in this sort of study. However, we might have chosen ‘the nation’, ‘the state’, ‘independence’, or various other expressions. Grandeur does have the advantage nonetheless of underlining the symbolic nature of the ideas under examination. For we are not speaking here of an abstract concept, but rather of a dynamic instrument of political action, an operative ideal. Thus the mysticism which permeates the notion of grandeur and looms over it, that shadow of the passions which gives it force but which obscures its essential structure, must give way to politics, wherein lies its source and its objectives.
PART I

Ideological roots and purposes of de Gaulle’s foreign policy

France cannot be France without greatness.
de Gaulle, War Memoirs
The personal equation: psychology, socialisation and culture

I. The Enigma

Valéry has written that ‘A great man is one who leaves others after him in a state of embarrassment.’ This, in de Gaulle’s case, is not the oft-predicted (but as yet unmaterialised) chaos of après de Gaulle in French politics, but the embarrassment of the chroniclers of de Gaulle’s political career, who have been forced by the conditions of everyday politics to take a stand on whether de Gaulle was right or wrong, good or bad. He frequently failed to fit into existing categories – ‘capitalist’ versus ‘socialist’ in domestic politics, ‘imperialist’ or friend of the Third World, or ally of West or East in the cold war.

This ambiguity extended to his personality. It was difficult for many observers to know what to expect of him. French journalist André Chambraud once wrote of him:

De Gaulle, the traditional officer, Maurrassian, born in 1890, was made for the purpose of loving colonial France and provincial France [la France des villages]. Instead, his historical role has been to precipitate their dissolution, to bring about a withdrawal to the hexagon, to preside over the birth of another France – industrial, urbanised, preoccupied first of all with material progress...a France which he no doubt understands badly.3

Foreign observers have found him less complicated. As a consequence of his active questioning of the international status quo, he alienated former allies. But neither was he in any sense revolutionary. Thus he often became the target of what James N. Rosenau has called ‘devil theories’, ‘in which the course of events is attributed to a power-hungry individual or to a conspiratorial group’. Such theories are especially attractive in times of tension, when it is easier to blame an individual for undesirable events than to take the time and effort to sift through many complex factors, ‘each of which is a necessary, though not a sufficient, cause’; they provide a ‘simple and quick explanation’, making it possible to both fix blame and cope with anxiety.9 But they are obviously insufficient, and, in the long run, unsatisfactory.
12 ROOTS AND PURPOSES OF DE GAULLE’S FOREIGN POLICY

At home, de Gaulle could not easily be fitted into the categories of ‘left’ or ‘right’ as they had tortuously developed since the French Revolution. His nationalism included elements of both right-wing nationalism – authoritarian and hegemonic – and left-wing nationalism – democratic and liberating – both of which had long and mainly distinct histories in post-Revolutionary France.¹

Often, a particular characterisation of de Gaulle reflected more on the observer than on de Gaulle himself, as the General pointed out in the case of the Republican Party’s presidential candidate in 1940, Wendell Willkie:

Because we conferred together in the High Commissioner's office, which M. de Martel had recently provided with a suite of Empire furniture, Willkie represented me as aping the Napoleonic style; because I was wearing the standard officer's summer uniform of white linen, he saw an ostentatious parody of Louis XIV; and because one of my men spoke of 'General de Gaulle's mission', Mr. Willkie hinted that I took myself for Joan of Arc. In this matter, Roosevelt's rival was also his imitator.⁴

Academic critics have often focused upon similar traits of style, along with de Gaulle’s politics. Nathan Leites has contrasted his pretensions to grandeur with what he considered to be de Gaulle’s true mediocrity.⁵ W. W. Kulschi placed him outside the bounds of normal politics:

He is a charismatic leader, i.e., a man who, together with his followers, believes that he has been called upon by God or by history (in any event by a supernatural force) to carry out great feats for the benefit of the nation. His vocation is independent of the will of other men. The only rational proof of this vocation is the success of his mission.

To Kulschi, not only was de Gaulle's mission irrational, but his chosen vehicle of action – nationalism – was dangerous; international politics ‘is not a contest in Christian virtue or a struggle between angels and devils. All nationalism is egoistic because it rests on the assumption that the nation is supreme.’⁶

Indeed, given the great conflicts of the twentieth century and the development of organicist nationalism (particularly its role in German ideology and political culture),⁷ the very fact that de Gaulle posits the primacy of the nation-state places him in a ‘devil’ role in the eyes of many. One American critic accused him of ‘an adventurist and irresponsible nationalism’ which ‘helped bring the world closer to a disregard of the deadly facts of the nuclear age’.⁸ By an irrepresible logic, de Gaulle, fairly or unfairly, was seen as a partial reincarnation of that phenomenon of the 1920s and 1930s, the quasi-charismatic (i.e. irrational) authoritarian leader of a nation-state which did not fully