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Part 1

The republic of Georges Pompidou

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1 Change and continuity

A decisive test for the Fifth Republic

The resignation of General de Gaulle on 28 April 1969 did not clear the ground for a seamless succession, and there were many reasons for this. Above all, his resignation came at the end of a convoluted crisis and seemed to represent its logical conclusion. Foreshadowed by the poor election results of 1965 and 1967 which had revealed the gulf that now separated public expectations from government policy, followed by the convulsive crisis of 1968 that appeared to call into question the very foundations of society and cause the state to totter, the resignation was the culmination of a gradual process of erosion in public support for de Gaulle's republic.¹ It was logical to wonder whether the departure of the founder of the Fifth Republic would mean a change of regime or merely a change of personnel.

This indeed was what was at stake in the succession process that got under way that 28 April. The creation of the Fifth Republic had been the personal achievement of General de Gaulle, who had never ceased to fashion as he saw fit, with piecemeal additions and adjustments, both the letter and the spirit of its institutions. From the constitutional reform of 1962, which had introduced presidential elections by universal suffrage, to a style of government that came close to direct democracy by vesting most of the decision-making power in the president, the regime had steadily strayed ever further from the parliamentary system laid down in the founding text of 1958.

This drift, which was deplored by many politicians especially on the left, seemed clearly linked to the personality of the founder of the Fifth Republic, to his pre-eminent historical role, to his charismatic personality and to the imperious style that inclined him to the view that once the ritual of universal suffrage had been celebrated, power was to be exercised by hierarchical, indeed military, command. Many of those engaged in politics felt that the departure of General de Gaulle ought to mark a resumption of normality, returning the regime to the letter of the

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constitution: that is, to parliamentary government. With the removal of the larger-than-life personality whose massive shadow had seemed to crush French politics ever since 1958, the era of ‘personal power’ that the left and a section of the right imputed to de Gaulle would be at an end. The new president of the republic, as one politician among others, would be forced, whatever his personal qualities, to negotiate with his peers, using the institutions in a way more in keeping with the constitution’s founding text. Moreover, the notion that Gaullism could not survive the disappearance of its founder was shared by the General’s own followers and perhaps by de Gaulle himself, firm in the conviction that he had had no predecessor and could have no genuine successor either. After all, just two days prior to the 27 April referendum, André Malraux, the most loyal of all de Gaulle’s followers, speaking at the final meeting of the General’s supporters, had stated that the post-de Gaulle era could not be built on the ruins of Gaullism. Malraux had thus pitched the future of the regime into the referendum balance and declared that de Gaulle’s republic could not outlive de Gaulle.

But if, for contrasting reasons, this analysis was shared by de Gaulle’s opponents and by his diehard supporters, it failed to take account of a number of other facts that were pulling in the opposite direction. First, there was the vast majority that the General had won in the June 1968 legislative elections, each component of which displayed its attachment to the Fifth Republic, even if some, like Valéry Giscard d’Estaing and his Independent Republicans, had opposed the General in the April referendum. Second, with its massive ‘yes’ vote in the 1962 referendum, the French electorate had ratified the constitutional changes and expressed a clear desire that the Fifth Republic should endure. Third, there was increasing support for the regime’s institutions among a section of the opposition that had taken on board the clear shift in public opinion, which was now firmly convinced, contrary to the view taken by the majority of French electors prior to 1958, that a democratic republic and strong executive power could after all coexist. François Mitterrand, the candidate of the united left in 1965, was attempting to win over to this presidential approach a section of those who had previously given him their backing. Meanwhile, in the centre, the managers who supported Jacques Duhamel, Joseph Fontanet or René Plevén sought to distance themselves ever more sharply from those who, like Jean Lecanuet and Pierre Abelin, remained frozen in unwavering opposition to any form of anti-European Gaullism.

It was around this issue that the various political forces, faced with the need to find a strategy and select candidates for the unexpected presidential election that de Gaulle’s resignation had triggered, would now group.

The candidature of Georges Pompidou

The twenty-eighth of April 1969 did not turn out to be the day of chaos that General de Gaulle and his loyal supporters had at every election warned would follow any result hostile to the ruling majority. On the contrary, everyone could now assess for themselves the ability of the institutions to weather a crisis. In view of the fact that the outgoing president of the republic had declared that his resignation would take effect at noon, Alain Poher, president of the Senate, who was entrusted under the constitution with the interim period, moved into the Elysée palace the same day at 3 p.m. There was doubtless some friction between the interim president, who was regarded as the true victor of the referendum, and the government, which after all had been appointed by de Gaulle and was still engaged in day-to-day business, but there was no threat of any real constitutional crisis. The Fifth Republic prepared calmly, if not placidly, to find a successor to Charles de Gaulle.

In actual fact, the name of this successor was already on everybody's lips. Georges Pompidou, prime minister from 1962 to 1968, the man who could take most credit for the June 1968 election triumph, and the potential leader of a parliamentary majority that in the main was quite ready to support him, had let it be known repeatedly during the first few months of 1969 that he intended to stand for president. It was believed that General de Gaulle had decided to resign in 1970 on his eightieth birthday and Pompidou was expecting to announce his candidature on that occasion.² Be that as it may, public opinion was in no doubt as to Pompidou's willingness to stand. One might of course object that in the tacit hierarchy of the Fifth Republic the second-ranking officer of state, and as such the heir apparent, was the current prime minister. But even if Maurice Couve de Murville could have been prevailed upon to stand, there were many reasons for him to stand aside. First, his political stature, after serving as prime minister for only a matter of months, was less substantial than that of his predecessor at the Hôtel Matignon (the residence of the prime minister). Second, there was a deep-seated enmity between the two men, since Pompidou remained convinced that, in an attempt to wreck his political career, de Murville had connived at slanders regarding his private life that were spread at the time of the Markovic affair.³ Lastly, if some of de Gaulle's supporters, angry with Pompidou for contributing to the failure of the referendum by presenting himself as a potential successor to the General, certainly felt tempted to block his path, this applied neither to the vast bulk of UDR deputies who saw Pompidou as their true leader,

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nor to the political grouping as a whole, which the former prime minister had reorganized around his own handpicked men at the Lille conference in 1967.⁴

Pompidou moved fast to head off any manoeuvre on the part of possible Gaullist rivals. On the 28th itself, in a message to de Gaulle expressing his loyalty and the regret he felt about the General's resignation, Pompidou informed him that, as he had already announced, he intended to present his candidature to succeed him. Early the following morning his parliamentary secretary officially announced Pompidou's decision to run. This received the immediate endorsement of the political office of the UDR, which recommended that the party should give its official support to Pompidou, as a candidate who had emerged from its own ranks. That evening both the parliamentary grouping and the executive committee of the UDR swung behind him.⁵

To the party that had governed France since 1958, Pompidou presented himself as de Gaulle's natural successor, emphasizing the thread of continuity that he intended to make the main theme of his appeal to the electorate. But Pompidou was too shrewd a politician to overlook the fact that the General had lost his referendum as a result of dissent among the centre right, following the decision by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and the majority of centrists to join the 'no' camp. To secure the presidency Pompidou knew that he had to attract back into the majority fold all those who had withdrawn their support from the General, while persuading the UDR to forgo taking revenge on its former allies for breaking the solidarity pact that had held since 1962. Pompidou therefore told the UDR deputies, reminding them of the elementary rules of electoral arithmetic, that in order to reach the decisive threshold it was essential to practise '*ouverture*' or openness, i.e. to form political alliances. Indeed, Pompidou was willing to extend this embrace to include all those who did not back the communist candidate.⁶ It remained to be seen whether those whose support he sought would be willing to enter into the alliance that he was offering.

Support from the right and 'opening' to the centre

Nothing could have appeared less certain than the backing of Giscard d'Estaing for Georges Pompidou's candidature. The young leader of the moderate right – he was forty-three at this time – had never concealed his ambition one day to succeed General de Gaulle. He knew, however, that on this occasion his chances were limited not only by his relative youth but also by the fact that he had no time to do the vital pre-campaign groundwork. But his inability to enter the fray did

not mean that he had to jettison any kind of personal strategy. If he could not himself stand, he could at least work to ensure that the transition he desired to see from Gaullists to moderates be effected by someone congenial to him, while he figured in the role of both stage director and designated successor. Thus, on 28 April, Giscard immediately mooted the idea of a ‘candidature of reassurance’, to be entrusted to a ‘man of experience’ – someone who had remained free of involvement in the political battles between majority and opposition. It was a portrait that one could hardly fail to recognize as that of Antoine Pinay. This was a clever move, since Pinay, who had served as prime minister under the Fourth Republic, might hope to attract a sizeable portion of the non-communist left to his candidature. Just one vital ingredient was missing: the agreement of Pinay himself. But, as in 1965, Antoine Pinay again side-stepped the challenge, declaring that he would only stand as a candidate of last resort in the event of a national emergency which, he added, did not then exist.⁷ Giscard’s efforts to discover an alternative ‘candidate of reassurance’ who would be prepared to participate in the proposed venture proved vain, since on 30 April the parliamentary grouping of his party, the Independent Republicans, resolved to back Pompidou, leaving their leader, Giscard, with no choice but to fall into line. Pompidou had thus managed to secure the support of the same majority coalition that until April 1969 had backed General de Gaulle.

But Pompidou wanted to go still further, gnawing into support for the centrists whom he knew to be split over the prospect of joining the government coalition. Ever since the 1967 elections, Jacques Duhamel, Joseph Fontanet, Pierre Sudreau and others had been seeking a dialogue with the government and, as prime minister, Pompidou had developed contacts with them. In May 1969 Pompidou renewed these contacts and, having undertaken, if elected, to preside over a politically open style of government and to relaunch European policy, he finally won the support of this centre ground. On 22 May, at the end of a radio debate, Jacques Duhamel, chairman of the parliamentary grouping Progrès et démocratie moderne, pledged his support for Pompidou’s candidature, thereby adding his voice to those of René Pleven and Joseph Fontanet who had both already taken this step. The presidential majority taking shape was thus tri-polar, adding a section of the centre to the Gaullists and the moderates.

Pompidou’s candidature looked all the more impregnable, given the utter prostration of his adversaries.

The left in tatters

In 1965, pitted against General de Gaulle, the Left, with François Mitterrand as its candidate, had gained an unexpectedly high vote that had restored its credibility. But the 1969 presidential election could hardly have come at a worse moment. Still reeling from the impact of the *événements* of 1968, the left was deeply divided. The communist party, which was isolated following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and exposed to the violent attacks of the *gauchistes*, wanted a single left-wing candidate who, as in 1965, would relieve it of the need to assess its numbers and would deprive the right of the ever effective electoral weapon of anti-communism. Any such move, however, would favour François Mitterrand, whose name would go forward as unity candidate. However, the Fédération de la gauche démocrate et socialiste (FGDS), which might have drawn strength from a second Mitterrand candidature, had collapsed in the aftermath of the 1968 events, while Guy Mollet, general secretary of the SFIO, was now worried by Mitterrand's openly declared ambition to lead the left. While the former partners of the non-communist left engaged in a trial of strength, a move by Gaston Defferre put an end to any notion of a single left-wing candidature. On 29 April, Defferre, deputy and mayor of Marseille, unexpectedly sought and won SFIO backing for his own bid for the presidency. The centrist image that Defferre had gained as parliamentary deputy and city mayor, following his attempt to form a 'broad federation' in 1965,⁸ set off a chain reaction. Defferre's candidature was rejected first by Mitterrand's Convention des institutions républicaines and then by Jean Poperen's Union des groupes et clubs socialistes, at their conference in Saint-Gratien. The PCF also rejected the centrist strategy implicit in Defferre's candidature, and chose as its own preferred candidate – not its general secretary Waldeck-Rochet, but Jacques Duclos, an old leader of good-natured and reassuring appearance. These two candidates of the left were quickly joined by two candidates of the extreme left, as the Parti socialiste unifié (PSU) rallied behind their national secretary Michel Rocard, and the Trotskyists of the Ligue communiste presented their leader Alain Krivine.⁹

With the left split, and its public support eroded by the fright felt by the French as they cast their minds back to the 1968 crisis, Pompidou had very little to worry about. Indeed, for Pompidou the only real danger was from the opposition centrists, with the candidature of the interim president of the republic, Alain Poher.

The candidature of Alain Poher

Whereas the candidature of Pompidou had long been expected, that of Alain Poher was the outcome of chance. He had become president of the Senate in October 1968 following the withdrawal, and with the backing, of Gaston Monnerville, but was virtually unknown to the French public. Since the existence of the Senate as an independent legislative chamber had been called into question by the reform put to referendum in April 1969, Alain Poher had found himself spearheading a rebellion of notables against General de Gaulle. The victory of the 'no' camp and Poher's resulting elevation to the Elysée suddenly transformed this discreet and unassuming senator into a prominent personality in French political life and therefore, at a stroke, made him a potential president in the eyes of French public opinion. This prospect, however, appeared to leave Poher cold. When questioned about his intentions, he replied that he would not stand. He stuck to this position even when Valéry Giscard d'Estaing urged him to take the place of the faltering Antoine Pinay. But two circumstances intervened to overcome the reluctance of the interim president. First, the opposition centrists, as well as a sizeable section of the non-communist left, saw him as the man best able to stop Pompidou. Pierre Abelin, Jean Lecanuet and the radical Félix Gaillard therefore urged Alain Poher to throw his hat into the ring. Rather more discreetly, Guy Mollet appealed for a candidate to step forward around whom socialists could rally without misgivings. The other factor that influenced Poher's decision was the findings of the opinion polls. Well before he had reached any decision on the matter, a growing number of electors were stating their determination to vote for him. This shift in public opinion towards Alain Poher culminated in mid-May when SOFRES credited him with 39 per cent of voting intentions in the first round of the election, while IFOP gave him 37 per cent. Either percentage would have placed him as runner-up to Pompidou. The projections for the second round of voting were of even greater interest: the Senate president was forecast to win with 56 per cent of the votes, leaving the former prime minister with 44 per cent.¹⁰

These encouraging prospects clinched the decision for Alain Poher. Having declared on 7 May, 'I am in no way a candidate, I do not wish to be, but I might perhaps be forced into it', by 12 May he had decided to take the plunge. The list of candidates was completed by a seventh man, Louis Ducatel, who represented nobody but himself. On 16 May 1969, the election campaign got under way.

The 1969 election campaign

What, in mid-May 1969, were the hopes and expectations of the French electorate that had just forced General de Gaulle to resign?¹¹ Opinion polls show that, as implicit in their ‘no’ vote in the April referendum, the French wanted a clean break from the politics of the past. A resounding 51 per cent of French people, as against 31 per cent, wanted the new president to introduce far-reaching change in the way that power was exercised. With the exception of foreign policy, where 51 per cent of French people as against 29 per cent wanted previous policies to be pursued, the desire for change touched every major area of French politics. Unsurprisingly, it was in the field of economic and social policy that expectations were highest, with 64 per cent of respondents as against 18 per cent hoping for a change in direction. The same desire for change was expressed (45 per cent as against 20 per cent) with regard to higher education. On the other hand, if the majority of French people wanted to see a fresh approach to constitutional issues, this was much less clearcut, with 39 per cent as against 30 per cent calling for change in this area. Looking closer, it is clear where concerns were focused and therefore easier to interpret the ‘no’ vote in the April 1969 referendum: 57 per cent of French people wanted their future president to act as an arbiter, above the fray, while just 32 per cent wanted him, like de Gaulle, to take personal charge of all the main planks of policy. The French people had not handed the General his notice inadvertently but out of a clear desire for change. Obviously the question was who, of the available candidates, could best fulfil this expectation. Until mid-May, opinion favoured Alain Poher over Pompidou.

Given their desire for a president who could act as arbiter, 51 per cent of French people felt that Alain Poher was better placed to play such a role than Pompidou. Poher was also thought more capable than Pompidou of being a ‘president for all French people’ (44 per cent as against 31 per cent for Pompidou); of ‘healing the rifts that had emerged between the two camps at the April referendum’ (43 per cent as against 20 per cent); and of addressing the interests of wage-earners (39 per cent as against 22 per cent), of farmers (30 per cent as against 24), and of small shopkeepers (40 per cent as against 18 per cent). Here again, one can see why the mid-May polls predicted a victory for Alain Poher. Pompidou, on the other hand, was viewed as a man of the right by 76 per cent of French people, whereas only 39 per cent attributed this label to Alain Poher, and as a ‘representative of capital’ by 55 per cent of respondents. To this was added a long list of terms that sketched in a rather unappealing picture of the majority grouping’s candidate: among