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## PRESIDENT MITTERRAND AND THE FRENCH POLITICAL SYSTEM

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The relevance of biography to the study of politics has often been called into question. Many political scientists have rejected biography outright as a pursuit more suited to psychologists, impressionistic journalists, and political historians. They have preferred the "scientific" study of political systems, within which there is little place for the individual leader. I would argue that an appreciation of the contribution of individual political leaders can be an essential component of any full understanding of a given polity, although this should not imply uncritical acceptance of a "great man" theory of political and historical development. Even if we accept, however, that individuals can leave their indelible imprint, it is unclear whether political biography, at least as practiced by certain of its exponents, is particularly well suited to measuring the contribution of individual leaders to a society's political development.

The central justification of biography *stricto sensu*, "that knowledge of the subject explains or illuminates his or her achievements," is far from axiomatic.<sup>1</sup> Several potential pitfalls await the biographer. First, there is the danger of over-identification with the subject, such that actions are judged disproportionately in the light of what the individual concerned asserts to explain his or her behavior. This is especially valid when a politician's memoirs are trusted as an objective statement of his or her beliefs or ideas or actions. Second, there is a tendency in certain quarters for an over-concentration on incidental personal detail. Much of what biographies seek to illuminate, in particular the psychological predispositions of their subjects, might actually be irrelevant to an assessment of the contribution to politics made by an individual. Unwarranted extrapolations may be made from early childhood experiences with little firm evidence to support the biographer's conclusions. Third, there is always the risk that individuals will be treated in isolation, extracted from the political or historical circumstances within which they operate.

These are, of course, oft-levelled criticisms which themselves caricature the biographical method. It is clear that a variety of different approaches can be subsumed under the title of political biography. There is no commonly agreed conceptual frame-

work. Attention has been concentrated upon a number of related lines of inquiry.

## PROBLEMS WITH PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY

At its best psychobiography can give interesting insights into the personality traits of political leaders, the reasons underlying their political involvement, and the driving force which motivates their pursuit of high office. To the extent that individuals matter, such analysis can be illuminating, especially in relation to whether many political leaders possess the requisite qualities and skills normally associated with leadership.<sup>2</sup> At its worst, however, such biography can be totally misleading, partly because it makes unwarranted extrapolations relating to an individual's political behavior from aspects of his or her private life, but also because it can misrepresent the latter. Formative experiences are subjectively selected, and automatic associations are established. This is not to deny that personal beliefs and traits of character inherited from an individual's past upbringing might be of considerable importance in explaining subsequent behavior patterns and political beliefs. Margaret Thatcher, the grocer's daughter who became UK Prime Minister, frequently referred to the fact. To refute this *en bloc* would be excessive. But an early note of caution is advisable. As Robert Skidelsky notes sardonically, the problem with such an approach is that "every achievement is actually something else displaced and it is this something else which ought to be the focus of biography."<sup>3</sup> Finally, there is the insuperable problem of measurement. How do we measure the importance of psychological factors, especially when so much of the evidence is so ambiguous, and provided by the interested politicians themselves?

## POLITICIANS AS REPRESENTATIVES OF AN AGE

A somewhat different approach justifies political biography not primarily by focusing on an individual's psychological make-up, but by treating politicians as representatives of a particular age or generation. The effort undertaken is not so much one of socialized psychology, as one of assessing the attributes of political leadership favored by a given historical situation. The individual political leader is of interest not primarily as a result of any dynamic personal qualities, but because he or she is able to articulate and aggregate the demands of at least one important element of society at a particular historical period. Such biography then addresses itself not just to the individual politician, but



also to the broader political environment. A related line of analysis concentrates on individuals as representatives of a generation. Thus in France biographies of the various student leaders of May '68 have proliferated. Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the unofficial leader of the events, is credited with being the perfect embodiment of the "May '68 generation." At its best such biography can indicate the manner in which different generations perceive political reality.

## THE GREAT MAN

The "great man" approach supports the view that "historical events are caused by, or bear the imprint of, or would have been very different but for, the unique personalities of leading actors."<sup>4</sup> Set against this model is one which asserts that the key to understanding historical and political change lies in analyzing a combination of social movements, socio-economic forces, institutional constraints, etc. In my opinion, the "truth" probably lies somewhere in between the two models. It is not necessary to accept a reductionist "great man" approach to political and historical development in order to appreciate the importance that political leaders can sometimes assume. Individuals exploit opportunities created by a particular set of circumstances, make choices from a number of different available options, exercise personal political skill. Some would argue that they occasionally exercise a charismatic authority, although it is not the purpose of this article to consider that area of study. But their achievements must be set in the context of the precise socio-economic, political, and cultural circumstances within which they function as political agents.

The study of political leadership clearly involves far more than biography, which nonetheless has a useful contribution to make. It demands consideration not merely of personality, but also of structural incentives and political methods for the realization of personal ambitions. Personalities never function in isolation. This article concentrates upon the career of one of France's undisputed "great men" of the post-war period, François Mitterrand. In particular, I shall concentrate on the manner in which he succeeded in manipulating the presidential institutions of the Fifth Republic to build his political career. I hope thereby to combine a study of leadership with an appreciation of a changing political environment, and to provide an assessment of how Mitterrand's ideas, style of leadership, and ways of acting within the political system have evolved since becoming president in 1981.

France has had more than its fair share of "great men," so much so that, prior to the Fifth Republic, a fear of strong leaders

became an essential part of the French republican tradition.<sup>5</sup> At first sight it appeared as though by choosing Charles de Gaulle in May-June 1958 the French nation had reverted from a democratic-republican model to a more authoritarian one, by bringing back the "great man" as they had done on several occasions in the past. In fact, such fears were greatly exaggerated. It is not proposed to consider the contribution made by General de Gaulle to the political development of the Fifth Republic, although such an analysis would provide proof, if any were needed, that certain individuals leave their own unmistakable imprint upon their political environment. I must point out, however, that the presidential institutions of the Fifth Republic bequeathed by de Gaulle have institutionalized highly personal political leadership for the first time in post-revolutionary republican history. The direct election of the French president, introduced by constitutional referendum in October 1962, has greatly promoted the importance of personal political appeal, at the expense of more collective forms of expression such as political parties. One of the central themes of this article is that this has benefited nobody more than Mitterrand.

Mitterrand was elected president in 1981, an event which surprised many commentators. I shall consider, firstly, changes in Mitterrand's attitude towards the institutions of the Fifth Republic, if there were any, once he had been elected president; secondly, the ideas which he sought to put into operation; and, finally, his individual governing style.

## MITTERRAND AND THE INSTITUTIONS OF STATE

Despite his oft-repeated opposition to the monarchical character of the Fifth Republic's institutions, Mitterrand's 1981 presidential platform, the 110 Propositions, arguably contained no constitutional proposals directly aimed at challenging the supremacy of the French president. As a candidate, Mitterrand promised to reduce the presidential mandate from seven to five years, and he paid vague respect to the idea of reinforcing the powers of the National Assembly, but these proposals were not implemented. Once elected president, Mitterrand substantially accepted the "executive presidency," which had evolved since de Gaulle and against which he had so violently railed since the late 1950s. Immediately upon his presidential victory of May 10, 1981, he dissolved the conservative-dominated National Assembly elected in 1978, and called upon the electorate to "give him the means to govern" by electing a Socialist majority. The dual mechanism of dissolution and of presidential involvement in elections for the



National Assembly was cleverly exploited by the new "executive president," as it had been by de Gaulle.

The crushing majority for the Socialist Party that was returned in June 1981 owed its existence to Mitterrand. Once this majority had been elected, he insisted that the 110 Propositions were to act as "the charter for the government's activities," and that Socialist deputies must not overstep the limits of this program. The pattern of presidential supremacy was thus reasserted by Mitterrand's early actions.

Although Mitterrand introduced no successful reforms to limit the powers of the president during the first five years of his presidency, he claimed to have modified the constitutional practice of the Fifth Republic and to have restored control of government. In September 1987 he explained:

Working in collaboration with Pierre Mauroy and then Laurent Fabius, I attempted to fulfill my duties in such a way as the president presides, the government governs, and parliament legislates. I have protected the major functions performed by the president, in particular the concentration on great national issues, which stem from the constitution and especially from article 5.<sup>6</sup>

As ever it is difficult to accept Mitterrand's assessment at face value, as the essential elements of presidential authority remained intact until March 1986. Nonetheless certain commentators did discern a move away from the all-powerful presidency under Mitterrand, firstly during the early period of Mauroy's premiership, and then much more apparently under Fabius, who replaced Mauroy as prime minister in July 1984. Mitterrand undoubtedly left Fabius a greater degree of maneuver than Mauroy. This was probably an attempt to prepare the ground rules for the virtual certainty of cohabitation after March 1986. But few doubted that when conflicts arose between prime minister and president, the latter retained his ascendancy. We are left with the impression of Mitterrand as a politician who, in an ideal world, would reinvent the presidency, but who, in the highly presidentialized regime of the Fifth Republic, was content, initially at least, to accept the regime as he found it.<sup>7</sup>

## THE ENIGMA OF PRESIDENT MITTERRAND

Discussion of the policies enacted by the political left in France lies well beyond the limited scope of this article. I shall limit my attention to how observers perceived Mitterrand to have changed over the seven-year period in office. In a highly provocative biography of Mitterrand's first seven-year period at the Elysée, Catherine Ney has discerned seven different Mitterrand's in her book *Les sept Mitterrand*. While Ney's historical allusions seem to me somewhat far-fetched, it is perhaps useful to retain four of her seven comparisons in order illustrate Mitterrand's essential political flexibility.

### FRANÇOIS-LÉON BLUM (MAY 1981-JUNE 1982)

Carried to power on a wave of left-wing enthusiasm in May 1981, which naturally led to comparisons with the Popular Front government of 1936, Mitterrand supported a radical program of social and economic change presided over by Mauroy, his first prime minister. The government was led by the Socialists but included Communist ministers, the first time this had happened since 1947. During the "state of grace" (May 1981-June 1982), the reforms carried out by the left stemmed directly from Mitterrand's 110 Propositions. It was a classic left-wing program: large swathes of French industry were nationalized, new powers were decentralized to the regions and local government, labour relations were reformed, and important redistributive social and fiscal reforms were enacted. On an economic level, the left relied upon Keynesian reflationary policies based on increased popular consumption as the key to growth and to fighting unemployment, which was declared to be the government's number one priority.

The comparison with Blum stems from the frenzied character of Socialist reforms during this first period. Mitterrand shared the belief—previously imposed on Blum in 1936—that after such a long absence from power, it would have been politically impossible for the left not to have gone ahead with an ambitious social and economic program of reforms. Mitterrand's primary objective was thus political, as well as strategic. His strategy was to tie the Communists into the governmental alliance in order to prevent them from making mischief outside of it, and to consolidate control over ex-Communist voters attracted to him in the 1981 election.

But there is little reason to doubt Mitterrand's personal commitment to the model of change outlined in the 110 Propositions. However we interpret his ideas, and however much we



recognize that strategic considerations have always held the upper hand over ideological ones, we are forced to recognize that once elected president in 1981, Mitterrand was extremely conscious of the fact that he symbolized the hopes of the *peuple de gauche*. It is interesting in this respect that Mitterrand was initially reluctant to accept the need for a "pause" in the reform program, as demanded by his finance minister Jacques Delors, or the introduction of a tighter, anti-inflationary economic policy, as urged with increasing insistence by both Delors and Mauroy.

#### "FRANÇOIS-CAMILLE CHAUTEMPS" (JUNE 1982-MARCH 1983)

The left's economic U-turn took place in two stages: in June 1982 and in March 1983, despite Mitterrand's early reservations. The allusion to Chautemps, the Radical prime minister who replaced Blum in 1937, is meant to signify Mitterrand's acceptance that the dream of a break with capitalism was dead, but that it was important not to admit it, for fear of alienating the left-wing electorate. In June 1982, Mitterrand succumbed to the pressure exerted by Mauroy and Delors and agreed to a deflationary economic package which attempted to ease the pressure on public spending and inflation. At this stage, neither Mitterrand nor his prime minister Mauroy was willing to admit publicly that the left had changed course. The crucial point in Mitterrand's first septennat was reached in March 1983, when the president was called upon to arbitrate between two opposing economic policies in a move which set the course for the rest of his presidency. In effect, Mitterrand agreed with those who argued that the government had to abandon its early attempt to reflate the French economy and to adopt a tight monetary policy in order to control inflation.<sup>8</sup>

Mitterrand's interminable ten-day hesitation before settling on one of these rival options was indicative of his governing style. It gave the impression that the new economic course did not fully enjoy the president's confidence.

#### "FRANÇOIS-RONALD REAGAN" (MARCH 1983-MARCH 1986)

According to Ney, having abandoned the left's messianic task of legislating a break with capitalism, Mitterrand—with characteristic flexibility—gradually became the apostle of economic liberalism, imported from Reagan's America and Thatcher's Britain. Ney points to Mitterrand's personal crusade for lower taxes in



1984, to his belief that artificial financial aid for lameduck industries should cease, to the new presidential discourse endorsing profit and success, and to a belief in the superior efficiency of the private sector, in order to provide the evidence for this comparison.<sup>9</sup>

Whatever the merits of Ney's comparison with Reagan, there was clearly a qualitative change in governmental policy and presidential discourse in the latter part of the first Socialist administration. For as long as Mauroy was prime minister the public had the impression that Blum-style reformist socialism remained on the agenda, symbolized dramatically in 1983-4 by the church schools crisis. In July 1984 the old-style Socialist Mauroy was replaced by Fabius, at thirty-seven the youngest prime minister this century, a man carefully nurtured by Mitterrand since the early 1970s. Analysis of Fabius's program between 1984 and 1986 lies outside the present study, but we should note that the ideology underpinning the Fabius administration was that of modernization, which for many was a euphemism for the left abandoning its left-oriented program of 1981-2.

Mitterrand's public speeches from late 1983 onwards suggest that this transformation of old-style Socialism was consciously willed. For instance it was Mitterrand who backed his then industry minister Fabius in February 1984 against Mauroy, his prime minister, in relation to the need for closures and job losses in the steel industry. Once Fabius had become prime minister, his full-scale modernization program arguably contributed to the slow death of old-style socialism in France. In a whole range of policy areas the left's traditional policies were quietly called into question in the name of economic efficiency: nationalizations, economic planning, welfare policy, employment policy, attitude towards the private sector, industrial policy. During this period Mitterrand was frequently to be heard justifying the policy options of his ambitious young prime minister. The disagreements that did occur between Mitterrand and Fabius were over the latter's overarching ambition, caustically dampened by Mitterrand, rather than over the content of government policy.

Taking the 1981-6 administration as a whole, we might argue that Mitterrand undoubtedly performed a valuable service for the French nation. Without the left's early radical program and the difficulties it encountered, it is unclear whether there would ever have been widespread recognition in France that the problems of economic management could not be explained solely in terms of the deficiencies of the capitalist system, and that the left, as well as the right, had to be prepared to manage the economy. Mitterrand himself had declared back in 1975 that "the economic

crisis is capitalism itself, it was caused by capitalism and not unleashed by the oil crisis of 1973."<sup>10</sup> Ten years later his tune had changed.

On a personal level the five-year period in office taught Mitterrand the absolute need to become well versed in economic affairs. Before 1981 he had deliberately cultivated a haughty, distrustful attitude towards economic issues. Mitterrand's reiteration of simplistic Marxist concepts to deal with complicated economic problems reflected in part his failure to understand their complexity. This willful economic ignorance cost him dearly in his televised debate with Valéry Giscard d'Estaing before the second round of the 1974 presidential elections. Such was his distrust of the economy that when elected president in 1981 he relegated the finance ministry—traditionally number two—to sixteenth position in the ministerial hierarchy, a foolhardy act quickly reversed. By 1986 Mitterrand could boast a solid grasp of the complexities of the economy; some would argue that this occurred only after a hard practical apprenticeship between 1981 and 1986.

#### “FRANÇOIS-L'ARBITRE”

In the legislative elections of March 1986 the Socialists, the presidential party, were defeated at the hands of a right-wing coalition. This inaugurated a constitutionally unprecedented period of cohabitation between a Socialist president and a right-wing parliamentary majority in the National Assembly. At one stroke the political basis for the executive presidency—the existence of a parliamentary majority to back the president—was removed. Mitterrand immediately named Jacques Chirac, leader of the victorious coalition, as prime minister, thereby respecting the eminently democratic logic that control of the executive must be entrusted to the winners of the latest election. From the outset, Mitterrand positioned himself as *Président de tous les Français*, the arbiter president above the political fray. His primary objective in stressing his role as president of all the French was to promote consensus across the left-right boundary in an attempt to efface the electorate's memory of the left's unpopularity from 1982 to 1986, and to promote a new image for himself as a wise, just and kindly but firm president, a figure above the humdrum of daily politics. From being the executive-president of 1981-6 Mitterrand now declared himself to be an arbiter, the constitutional justification for which lay in article 5 of the 1958 constitution. He did not challenge the government's right to govern according



to the constitution, but reserved his duty to fulfill his constitutional duties, in particular that of arbitrage.

Far from being a disinterested, objective referee, Mitterrand initially envisaged his arbiter function as one of defending the rights of minorities and the underprivileged in society. In May 1986 he declared:

It is my duty to act in those essential areas which form part of the presidential domain, as defined by the constitution. In addition, in exercising my arbitral function, I must represent all those people who form part of a minority, and all those categories of people who are liable to suffer from injustice.<sup>11</sup>

This suggested that the new, benevolent father-figure president had not forgotten his left-wing electors and would strive to protect their interests against a confrontational Chirac. But it was not in Mitterrand's interests to transform cohabitation into a new left-right battle. To a large extent, Mitterrand's attempt to portray a new ecumenical image as president of all the French could be reduced to political maneuvering—an attempt to attract center-right voters alienated by Chirac into the forthcoming presidential election. But it also reflected a mature personal conclusion, reached after the left's years in power, that the left and right shared the same viewpoint on many of the great problems facing France, and that cohabitation had finally revealed this to be the case. This conclusion lay behind Mitterrand's decision to name his old rival Michel Rocard as prime minister in May 1988, and it explained his attempts to extend the boundaries of his presidential majority beyond the strict confines of the Socialist Party, once he had been re-elected in May 1988.

“FRANÇOIS-ROBERT SCHUMANN” (MAY 1988-MARCH 1990)

While it is clearly too early to draw a provisional balance sheet of the first two years of Mitterrand's second seven-year term, we can at least indicate certain key factors. In his 1988 campaign charter, the *Lettre à tous les Français*, Mitterrand proclaimed solemnly:

I believe and hope that whatever majorities there are in future, we will return neither to an “absolute” president, in effect an all-powerful chief, as with the beginning of the Fifth Re-

public, nor to a president who has no power at all, a nonentity, as in the Fourth.<sup>12</sup>

A survey of the first twenty months or so since the April-May 1988 presidential elections suggests, superficially at least, that Mitterrand had respected his campaign promise to exercise a more limited conception of presidential power than had existed prior to cohabitation. He had concentrated largely on the traditional presidential domain of foreign policy, defense and European affairs, leaving Rocard's minority Socialist government in charge of domestic policy. Manifest presidential interventionism in areas "reserved" for the prime minister were less apparent under Rocard than either Mauroy or Fabius. But this conclusion must be qualified. Rocard had justified the major reforms passed during his premiership—wealth tax, minimum wage, priority for education—by referring to Mitterrand's *Lettre à tous les Français*. Presidential supremacy remained intact, despite Mitterrand's weakening hold over the Socialists and a creeping sensation of *l'après-mitterrandisme* haunting the corridors of power.

Leaving mundane domestic policy issues to his government, Mitterrand has concentrated upon exploiting his position as one of Europe's elder statesmen in order to hasten European integration and the construction of a federal Europe. France's presidency of the EC in the second half of 1989 was extremely active in this respect. Mitterrand also drew considerable prestige from the bicentenary celebrations of the French Revolution. For three days (July 13-16, 1989) Paris was transformed into the diplomatic capital of the world, when the bicentenary celebrations were combined with the G7 meeting of the world's leading nations.

By comparison with the first two years of Mauroy's premiership (1981-3) French socialism would appear to have lost its heroic aura. It has become, instead, a socialism of the possible, as Mitterrand himself advocated in 1970. Left-wing critics of Rocard's consensual brand of social democracy have criticized the administration for lacking a "grand design," criticisms which are ultimately addressed to Mitterrand. What the left has gained in credibility, particularly in relation to its capacity for economic management, it has perhaps lost in inspiration. It is easier to inspire enthusiasm amongst grass roots supporters for visions of an alternative society than it is for inflation statistics. Such is the price, however, of political success, a success to which Mitterrand has contributed more than anybody else.



## POLICY ADVISERS

In the words of Schifres and Sarazin:

Whatever the subject, however miniscule, Mitterrand never confined himself to a single source of information, even if it were fullest and most knowledgeable. On the contrary, he always compounded the briefings, the contacts, the conversations, and formed his opinion in that way.<sup>13</sup>

The advantage of this method of patient reflection was that Mitterrand was always particularly well informed before taking decisions, and therefore unlikely to act on impulse. The disadvantage was that the president often gave the impression of uncertainty and hesitation, fuelling suspicions of deep disagreements with his prime minister or other ministers even where none actually existed. On occasion, this governing style had unfortunate consequences, especially when Mitterrand was called upon to settle major economic questions. His apparent hesitations caused financial markets to panic.

In his excellent biography *Les années Mitterrand*, Serge July, editor of *Libération*, recalls in considerable detail how, leading up to the crucial economic turn-around of March 1983, Mitterrand finally arrived at his decision to devalue the franc and remain within the EMS. Ten days passed before the president finally confirmed his decision, during which period even his closest advisers claimed to have been kept in the dark, so much so that contradictory statements were regularly issued to the media. In fact the coalitions advocating the rival options both believed at various stages that they had won the president over. For a full ten days, the sitting prime minister Mauroy was uncertain whether or not he was to remain at his post and, if so, which economic policy he would be required to pursue. A similar conclusion went for finance minister Delors, who on at least one occasion believed he was about to be named prime minister. The overall impression was one of confusion and uncertainty, undoubtedly because Mitterrand himself was torn between his emotional commitment to continuing the socialist experiment and the perilous state of the French economy. Indeed, the president had to make repeated

speeches throughout France to drive home the message that he fully supported his finance minister and the new austerity policy.

To be able to make informed, well thought-out decisions Mitterrand consistently seeks conflicting policy advice, plural sources of information and rival policy advisers. This may take the form of setting two or more advisers to work on the same policy dossier in order to test their mettle, without, of course, informing them of their dual labors. Far from being merely a presidential game, this method is felt by Mitterrand to avoid excessive hierarchy amongst advisers, to provide him with the fullest advice possible and to remind everybody that no one can take his approval for granted. The spirit of competition amongst Mitterrand's policy advisers is reportedly intense.

Very few of Mitterrand's advisers, not even Jacques Attali, the "special" adviser until April 1991, can genuinely claim to be continually in the president's confidence, or to predict the way that his mind is working. Mitterrand has a taste for secrecy. His advisers have on occasion been so firmly convinced that the president has made a firm decision that they have announced it as such to the media, only later to be reprimanded and to fall into temporary disgrace. Undoubtedly Mitterrand's secrecy has always been an important part of his personality, but it is reinforced by the isolation imposed by the nature of presidential decision-making, an isolation characteristically felt by chief executives elsewhere.

Mitterrand's extensive informal network goes well beyond that comprised by the *mitterrandistes* mentioned below. Those who, in all walks of life, have served Mitterrand will not be forgotten, although rarely taken into his confidence. Those who have had the misfortune to cross him, and who remain unrepentant, for example, Pierre Mendès-France, will rarely be forgiven. Rocard had to spend some eight years of purgatory before finally being forgiven by Mitterrand for his presumption in challenging him for the Socialist nomination in 1981. These ties are based as much on personal affinity and mutual exchanges of services as they are on political loyalties. Witness, for example, Mitterrand's cultivation of student leaders such as Isabelle Thomas, rock stars such as Renaud, or sporting heroes. Partly because of his checkered career, members of Mitterrand's network by no means all belong to the left, nor are they limited to the world of politics.

## THE MITTERRANDISTES

Mitterrand's biographers are unanimous in pointing to the importance of the highly complex ties binding him to his closest political



associates. In fact he has attracted intense political loyalty from several generations of followers, rallying progressively to his cause throughout his long career. A first generation of loyal subordinates gradually crystallized during the Fourth Republic, when he led the *Union Démocratique des Socialistes de la Résistance*. These included Georges Dayan, a friend since student days who died in 1979, Roland Dumas, foreign secretary since 1983, Georges Beauchamps, who quit politics for business, and Louis Mermaz, head of the Socialist parliamentary group for most of the Mitterrand decade. The next generation of mitterrandistes, unsurprisingly, were younger. Their loyalty to Mitterrand was forged in the early 1950s. This second group included Charles Hernu, whose *Club des Jacobins* was one of the few genuine clubs in the early *Convention des Institutions Republicaines* (CIR), Pierre Joxe and Claude Estier. These historic *mitterrandistes* were suspicious not only of each other, but also of the sabras, the new generation of Mitterrand's protégés who made their careers within the Socialist Party after 1971. The sabras were so named after the first generation of native Israelis; they had come to the Socialist Party as their first conventional political engagement and had demonstrated an absolute loyalty to Mitterrand. The most prominent sabras still largely dominate the Socialist Party; these include Fabius, prime minister 1984-6 and president of the National Assembly since June 1988; Lionel Jospin, party leader 1981-6 and now education minister; and Attali, Mitterrand's personal adviser from the mid-1970s until April 1991, a man credited with an inside knowledge of the president that few can match.

Mitterrand demanded absolute loyalty from his political aides, and usually obtained it. In fact, rivalries between mitterrandistes were frequently intense, as each competed for the leader's favor. Indeed the leader saw such competition as healthy, because it prevented any one politician from emerging as the successor and thereby potentially threatening his continued suzerainty. When one of Mitterrand's presumed heirs assumed that he was strong enough to contradict the leader, he was firmly cut down to size, as Fabius discovered to his cost in 1985-6. The mitterrandistes were conscious of belonging to a privileged family, *les intimes du Prince*. Despite their fratricidal rivalries, especially between the CIR clan and the sabras, the different generations of Mitterrand's lieutenants usually subjected themselves to his will. From around 1974 onwards, with his control of the Socialist Party virtually complete, the leader—follower ties developed between Mitterrand and his lieutenants promoted patron—client relationships, which intensified once he had won the presidency. Politicians

who depended on Mitterrand for their political careers usually rewarded their sponsor with absolute loyalty. Apart from reflecting his personal qualities, Mitterrand's political style probably developed from his original status as an outsider, a parliamentary broker well versed in the art of political flexibility, distrustful of institutional rigidities.

Thus personalized ties were privileged as a mechanism for governing, first the party, and late the nation. For this reason, official governing structures probably bore scant relationship to the manner in which power was actually exercised. Mitterrandism became synonymous with a de-institutionalization of decision-making. This could be illustrated with regard to both the Socialist Party before 1981 and the actual rather than formal structure of authority in Mitterrand's governments after 1981. Mitterrand governed the Socialist Party after 1974 in a largely presidential manner, creating a "dual circuit of legitimacy" within the party leadership by appointing his own personal delegates to parallel the work of the official national secretariat, the party's main executive organ.<sup>14</sup> These delegates were responsible to Mitterrand alone, and they enabled him to keep himself informed of all the party's main policy areas and activities without having to rely on the official organization. After Mitterrand was elected president, his political advisers in the Elysée staff (*le Secrétariat Général de l'Elysée*) performed a similar function, this time in relation to government departments. Under Mauroy (1981-4) and still more under Fabius (1984-6), the governmental system was largely dominated by mitterrandistes, although Mauroy could not really be described as such. This greatly reduced the potential for conflict between the different institutions of the Socialist power structure—party leadership, parliamentary group, and executive. Each was controlled by the president's supporters, or, in the case of Mauroy until 1984, firmly subordinated to the president.

Mitterrand's preference for evolving new types of personalized, unofficial arrangements for guiding the government and the Socialist Party in the right direction was displayed in numerous ways. In a typically French manner the dining-table performed a quasi-official function as the arena where great affairs of state were discussed in a semi-formal fashion. At the early stages of his presidency, especially during the "state of grace" (1981-2), he spent a minimum of two breakfasts and one dinner a week meeting with representatives of the party leadership, the prime minister and selected ministers. The great novelty of these occasions was the *petit déjeuner du courant A* on Tuesday mornings, when the president met with the leaders of his faction within the Socialist Party, led by Jospin, in the absence of the



prime minister Mauroy. Such meetings between the president and his party leaders to discuss policy were unprecedented in the history of the Fifth Republic. Critics argued that they were symbolic of the chaos wrought within the executive by Mitterrand's governing style. Mauroy's authority as prime minister was frequently undermined by individual ministers appealing directly to the president to back them against the prime minister.

If Mitterrand has made political loyalty into a cardinal virtue, this has been transformed only rarely into personal friendship. Those to whom he permits himself to use the familiar *tu* form of address are limited to his immediate family, and a handful of exceptionally close friends. Despite the rivalries prevailing amongst Mitterrand's different lieutenants, the sense of all belonging to an extended family is important. Every year, the extended mitterrandiste family joins together on a number of symbolic occasions, such as the Elysée garden party on July 14, or the trek to Solutré in Burgundy just before the September *rentrée des classes*. Media attention focuses closely upon who is invited to such gatherings, and even more so on those out of favor.

Mitterrand's political career has been characterized above all by a rare capacity to adapt to changing political circumstances. He was one of the first politicians to respond with shrewd acceptance of the new "rules of the game" implied by the presidential election, despite his initial condemnation of the new regime as a *coup d'état permanent*. His status as presidential leader of the left for most of the period after the first direct election of the president in 1965 was of immense political benefit to him, eventually carrying him to the presidency in 1981. There was nothing predestined about this.

Mitterrand was initially an unlikely champion of the left. He displayed considerable political skill in his dealings with other politicians, opponents and allies alike, as well as in his perception of the requirements of political strategy. Of course, he had his share of chance and misfortune, like any other successful politician. Along with his flexibility, his personal resilience, and his ability to recover from seemingly hopeless political situations, as in 1958, 1968 or 1986, should be noted.

While there can be little doubt concerning the importance of the presidential institutions of the Fifth Republic for Mitterrand's career, it is probably impossible as yet to measure how great his contribution to the contemporary political environment in France has been. Any assessment involves a large measure of subjective consideration. Had Mitterrand not won the presidency in 1981, the left would have been deprived of the possibility of attempting to translate its radical dreams, nurtured by long years of opposi-

tion, into reality. Without the left's early radical program and the difficulties it encountered, it is unclear whether the degree of economic consensus which currently exists in France would ever have materialized. In so far as his first seven-year term as president symbolized the transformation of old-style socialism, Mitterrand must take the credit or blame, symbolically at least, for reconciling the left with the economy, and the Socialist Party with its social-democratic fate. This is so, although he was clearly reacting to events, rather than foreseeing them clearly. On the positive side, Mitterrand is a living testimony to the fact that the reformist left in France no longer feels a sense of exclusion from the political system of the Fifth Republic. By extension he has helped to secure a wider, bi-partisan acceptance of the political regime. Of course, none of these factors should be ascribed to Mitterrand alone. The economic and political aggiornamento of his first term was forced upon him by complex forces outside of his control. At best, he reacted with considerable flexibility to events he only partially commanded. But some would argue that the effectiveness of political leadership depends as much on a leader's adaptability as it does on any refusal in principle to change course. Our final impression of Mitterrand must be that of a formidable politician able to command unrivalled loyalty, the most formidable certainly since de Gaulle, but also that of a man who remains an enigma. In the words of July again, "even for his closest friends, the man is elusive."<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Robert Skidelsky, "Only Connect: Biography and Truth," in *The Troubled Face of Biography*, ed. E. Homberger and J. Charmley (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> See Hugh Berrington, "The Fiery Chariot: British Prime Ministers and the Search for Love," *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 4 (1974), pp. 345-69, for a detailed exposition of the argument that "eminence in politics should be distinctively, perhaps peculiarly, linked with personal maladjustment" (p. 363).

<sup>3</sup> Skidelsky, "Only Connect," p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Skidelsky, "Only Connect," p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Fear of strong leaders reflected the fact that since the French Revolution, republican regimes in France had tended eventually to succumb to the will of strong leaders, who subsequently became dictators, temporary or otherwise.

<sup>6</sup> *Le Monde*, "Bilan du septennat," p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> As the new president explained: "The institutions? I adapt myself to them, since they have been accepted by the French. I respect them. There are in the constitution some stipulations



which I have never liked and which I do not like even now. But it does not seem to me the moment for reform. It is not a major preoccupation of the French, nor is it one of mine." *Paris Match*, cited in Catherine Ney, *Les sept Mitterrand* (Paris: Grasset, 1988), p. 169.

<sup>8</sup> The choice was whether to remain within the EMS, devalue the franc and accept a deflationary economic package, or else to withdraw from the EMS, adopt protectionist measures for French industry and continue on the reflationary path traced since May 1981. Mitterrand chose the former course of action, confirming thereby that France could neither isolate itself through adopting protectionism, nor indefinitely pursue radically different economic policies from those of its main trading partners.

<sup>9</sup> In fact the comparison with Reagan probably owes more to flights of journalistic fantasy than to anything else. To compare these two presidents operating within such different political systems is clearly somewhat misleading. Despite certain superficial similarities, there were limits to Mitterrand's liberalism in economics.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Ney, *Les sept Mitterrand*, p. 169.

<sup>11</sup> *Le Monde*, "Bilan du septennat," p. 37.

<sup>12</sup> *Libération*, April 7, 1988. The comparison with Robert Schumann was originated by the author, in the tradition established by Ney.

<sup>13</sup> M. Schifres and M. Sarazin, *L'Elysée de Mitterrand: secrets de la maison du prince* (Paris: Alain Moreau, 1985), p. 109.

<sup>14</sup> R. Cayrol, "La Direction du Parti socialiste: organisation et fonctionnement," *Revue Française de Science Politique*, vol. 28 (1978), p. 203.

<sup>15</sup> Serge July, *Les Années Mitterrand* (Paris: Grasset, 1986), p. 19.