The Hyperpresident

Philip Gordon

It would be easy to predict the coming implosion of Nicolas Sarkozy's still-new presidency. The French, after all, are notoriously averse to change and have a proven track record of stopping reforms in their tracks—just ask former President Jacques Chirac, who in 1995 saw his modest plans for reforming the welfare state rejected by hundreds of thousands of angry protesters. Or ask former Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, whose even more modest efforts to tweak the French youth labor market ten years later were similarly rejected, this time by the very young people the reforms were designed to help.

Even when the French do not bring down governments with their feet they bring them down with their ballots—prior to 2007, in every parliamentary election since 1978 the French had voted out of office whichever party they had voted in the previous time. (Two presidents during that period, François Mitterrand and Jacques Chirac, did get re-elected, but in both cases not until after the majority in parliament had gone to the opposition.) Add to all this the non-stop pace of the ambitious Sarkozy and his defiant attitude toward French political and social conventions (for example, by vacationing in America, taking boating trips with rich friends, and jogging in shorts), and all the conditions seem to be in place for a regime that will trip up, exhaust itself, or create too many enemies before it gets anything done.

All that would be easy to predict but is, I think wrong. Sarkozy got elected running on an explicit platform of major change and praise for hard work, discipline, tax cuts—and even the United States. His victory by a comfortable, second-round margin of 53 percent to 47 percent for the Socialist Party candidate Ségolène Royal suggests that the French may be more open to change than conventional wisdom had suggested. Moreover, Sarkozy is blessed with a hopelessly divided and demoralized opposition, unlikely to be able to challenge him anytime soon (in part because of his own cleverness in co-opting some of the most popular members of the Socialist Party). And for all the rhetoric about making a "clean break" with the past, an image reinforced by the frenetic pace of the workaholic new president, Sarkozy has already shown a willingness to compromise on issues like the 35-hour work week, university reform and "minimum service" for public transport. Remarkably, Sarkozy's popularity has actually grown since taking office. His stunning approval rating, over 60 percent, is higher than that of any French president since General Charles de Gaulle after his return to power in 1959.

Sarkozy's honeymoon, of course, will not last forever. The vested interests who oppose change will resist and try to sabotage his reforms, the government will inevitably make mistakes, and, eventually, the opposition will find its feet (and new leaders). Most important, if recent signs that the French economy is slowing bear out, the government's popularity—and its abil-

Philip H. Gordon *is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. He is author of* Winning the Right War *(2007) and translator of Nicolas Sarkozy's book* Testimony: France, Europe and the World in the 21st Century *(2007).*

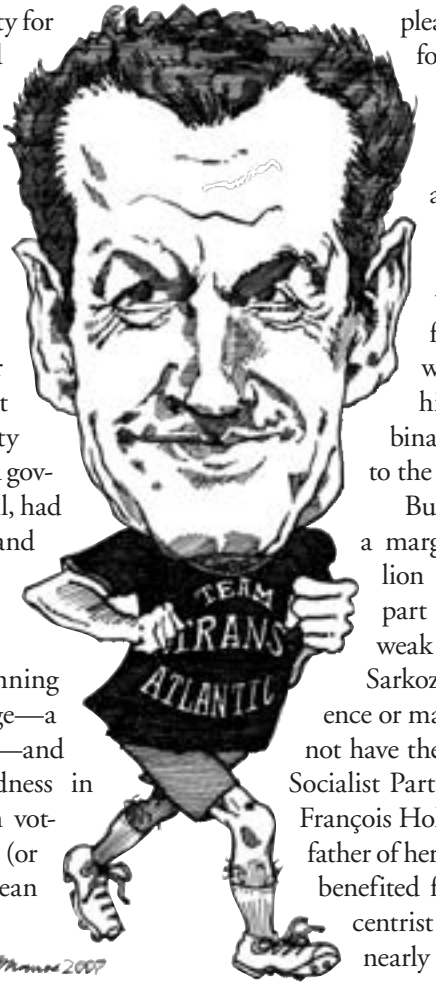
ity to implement its promised reforms—will take a severe hit, as unemployment and budget deficits mount. Even so, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that something significant has happened in France. The French have elected a leader who has promised to break with thirty years of welfare-state stasis at home and conventional risk-averse diplomacy abroad, and whose energy, dynamism and ambition have not been seen since the foundation of the Fifth Republic in 1958. Sarkozy's success in reforming France over the next five years is far from guaranteed. More certain is that this determined *hyperprésident* is going to try, and that France will never be the same again.

The Road to Sarkozy

By all logic, or at least all recent precedent, Nicolas Sarkozy should not have won the 2007 French presidential election. As already noted, the French have for a generation shown an unparalleled proclivity for kicking out their leaders, and Sarkozy was not only from the incumbent governing party but a major figure in it. The French electorate had no reason to be more forgiving in 2007 than in previous years, and it would have been reasonable to expect voters to turn to the Socialist Party after five years of rule by the Gaullist Jacques Chirac and his majority in parliament. The Socialist-led government of 1997–2002, after all, had performed reasonably well and had now been out of power for the seemingly mandatory one electoral cycle.

Moreover, Sarkozy was running on a platform of major change—a "clean break" with the past—and had demonstrated such boldness in his career to date that French voters had good reasons to suspect (or fear) that he might actually mean what he said. Sarkozy told the French they would have to work harder if they wanted to get paid more, promised to cut taxes to stimulate the economy, insisted on the need for labor market reform and expressed his admiration for the United States—all potentially unpopular positions in France. He was an outsider who did not attend the prestigious École Nationale d'Administration like most other French politicians and whose father had immigrated to France from Hungary. He had first appeared on the French political scene as an ambitious twenty-year-old youth leader, challenged and defeated a Gaullist "baron" in his run for mayor of Neuilly-sur-Seine at age 28 (a job in which he later risked his life by personally negotiating with a bomb-carrying hostage-taker), and rolled the dice again (unsuccessfully, this time) in 1995 by splitting with his former mentor Chirac and backing a rival, Edouard Balladur, in the presidential election that year.

So if it was true that the French liked the appearance of change (new faces in office) but not actual change (that might threaten their pleasant but ultimately unaffordable way of life), why vote for someone like this? The alternative candidate, the youthful and attractive Royal, offered the appearance of change the French people were believed to want. She would certainly look different from Chirac, but she wouldn't depart much from his policies—the perfect combination of attributes according to the conventional wisdom.



But Sarkozy did win, and by a margin of more than 2.2 million votes. His victory can in part be attributed to Royal, a weak candidate who did not have Sarkozy's leadership skills, experience or mastery of issues, and who did not have the unqualified support of her Socialist Party (including First Secretary François Hollande, her then partner and father of her four children). Sarkozy also benefited from the role played by the centrist François Bayrou, who won nearly 20 percent of votes in the

first round but then refused Royal's offer to join forces for the second, in which two thirds of his support went to Sarkozy. Certainly Bayrou's impressive first-round score—more than three times the votes he had received in 2002's first round—reflected voter discontent with both Sarkozy (who scared them) and Royal (who did not impress them).

None of these factors, however, undermines the interpretation of Sarkozy's victory as a genuine French desire for change. It cannot be said that Sarkozy was somehow elected by accident (as Jacques Chirac may have been in 2002, when he found himself facing far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen in the second round), or that the majority of French voters did not know what they were doing. The genuine policy differences between Sarkozy and Royal were the greatest between two French presidential candidates since François Mitterrand proposed "breaking with capitalism" in his 1981 face-off with Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. In 2007 the French choice was between Royal's reassuring status quo and Sarkozy's risky pitch for change. The French knew what they were getting when they chose the latter.

A Not-So-Clean Break

The essence of Sarkozy's domestic message is that the French must work more and harder if they are to reverse their relative decline. During the election campaign, Sarkozy brutally pointed out that, while France's GDP was 25 percent greater than Britain's in the late 1970s, it was now 10 percent lower, meaning that France was falling behind as a world power, the British were buying up the French countryside, and a French "brain drain" toward London was underway. His remedy was "more pay for more work", a concept he claimed would increase French buying power and create jobs, and a break with the Socialists' previous efforts to create jobs by cutting the work week (without an equal cut in pay). In his first few months in office Sarkozy has taken modest steps to implement this plan, notably by eliminating the tax on overtime earnings—though critics point out that this will simply encourage employers to extend hours for current workers rather than expand employment. He has also set a ceiling for the state's overall tax take from any individual at 50 percent and eliminated the estate tax for almost all taxpayers, again to try to put more money back in taxpayers' hands. Unusually for a French politician, Sarkozy has no qualms about "helping the rich", and believes the French, like the Americans he so admires, should reward and honor success rather than resent it.

The biggest domestic test for Sarkozy will come if he tries to liberalize France's generous welfare state and notoriously inflexible labor market laws. He insists that France can never fulfill its ambitions if some workers are allowed to start taking full pensions at age fifty and companies are burdened by overly restrictive rules on hiring and firing. Remarkably for a French politician, when critics question the French readiness to accept such changes, he favorably cites the example of none other than Margaret Thatcher, who faced down massive protests and strikes with an "unbreakable will to get things moving", leading to decades of prosperity in the UK. The analogy may be somewhat overstated: For all its troubles France today is not as badly off as was Britain in the late 1970s. But Sarkozy's embrace of the Thatcher model does suggest a seriousness of purpose that should not be underestimated. Sarkozy may not succeed in facing down the strikes that are sure to materialize if he proposes major pension or labor reforms, and he may ultimately be obliged to compromise. But the prospects for at least some economic liberalization are better than they have been for decades.

One area in which Sarkozy is decidedly *not* like Thatcher is on the question of Europe. Indeed, on the very evening of his election, Sarkozy announced that France had "returned to Europe" and pledged to lead the European Union out of the institutional crisis that began with President Chirac's failed referendum on a new EU constitution in May 2005. Sarkozy supports a stronger European defense and opposes Turkey's accession, which he argues would dilute the EU and prevent the possibility of a common political agenda. In Sarkozy's analysis, it was not the French rejection of the proposed EU constitution that provoked the crisis, but rather the French public's lack of faith in the EU that led to the rejection. Upon taking

43 and 23 at the Bush family compound in Maine in August

office he immediately campaigned to persuade other EU members to adopt a more modest EU "reform treaty" and claimed a leading role in negotiating it at the June 2007 Berlin EU summit—in the process almost overshadowing the German EU presidency and Angela Merkel herself. Like most French presidents before him, Sarkozy recognizes that France is too small on its own to be a major global player, but believes that the European Union can be leveraged to support French designs.

Sarkozy's attachment to the EU, however, should not be misinterpreted. Deep down, the new French president is a nationalist who puts French interests first. He will pragmatically support the EU when it serves French interests, but he will not hesitate to challenge it if it does not: hence his promotion of a merger between French energy giants Suez and Gaz de France to prevent an Italian takeover of the former, his populist criticism of the European Central Bank for refusing to ease monetary policy, and his unilateral intervention in the case of five Bulgarian nurses held hostage in Libya, who were freed just prior to the announcement of French arms and nuclear energy deals with Tripoli.

For all his liberalism and admiration of Thatcher, Sarkozy is also clearly a big believer in the state and a relative protectionist at heart. As his role in the Suez-Gaz de France merger shows (following similar interventions while finance minister in the early 2000s), he has no intention of passively accepting the vicissitudes of the global market, or even the European one.

Finally, as France's first President born after World War II, Sarkozy appears to have none of his recent predecessors' attachment to the EU as a means of ensuring intra-European peace—something his generation takes for granted. Sarkozy will thus work with Europe's other new leaders, such as Gordon Brown and Angela Merkel to promote a strong Europe, but in an entirely unsentimental way. And he will do so only when it is consistent with his interpretation of the French national interest and his own political needs.

Sarkozy is also sure to leave his mark on French foreign policy more broadly, most notably on the issue of France's historically difficult relationship with the United States. In his newly revised book, *Testimony*, he stresses his admiration for the United States and says he has "no intention of apologizing for feeling an affinity with the greatest democracy in the world." As an outsider in France who rose to the top on the back of his drive and talent, Sarkozy adores America's meritocracy, work ethic, social mobility and respect for entrepreneurship. He took a great risk during the campaign by paying a personal visit to President George W. Bush and praising the unpopular United States—steps then assumed to constitute political suicide—but he won nonetheless, suggesting that French anti-Americanism is both overstated and more limited to Parisian elite circles than commonly believed.

Sarkozy's attitude toward the United States has already had an impact. In meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice after his election, Sarkozy reportedly told her that, "We will sometimes disagree with you. But when we disagree with you it will be because we actually disagree with you." After decades of apparent French efforts to oppose some American policies simply to contain American power,

this attitude marks a sea change that opens up important possibilities for constructive cooperation between the two countries. More substantively, Sarkozy has signaled his willingness to consider rejoining NATO's integrated military commands, from which France withdrew in 1966. The new French logic is that America and its Atlanticist allies in NATO will never trust or support European Union efforts to develop more defense autonomy unless France can show itself to be a loyal NATO ally and that EU and NATO defense efforts should both be strengthened. The deal is far from done, but Sarkozy's openness to the principle of NATO reintegration is a huge step forward toward a more trusting U.S.-French relationship.

France under Sarkozy is also likely to see eye-to-eye more often with the United States on the critical question of the Middle East. Sarkozy is a strong supporter of Israel (while also a determined promoter of an independent Palestinian state) and an opponent of Syrian intervention in Lebanon. Like the United States, he argues that an Iranian nuclear weapon is "unacceptable" and supports stronger economic sanctions against the Tehran regime, which he denounces for its support for terrorism, repression of human rights and opposition to Israel. Sarkozy has publicly warned that a failure by the international community to deal with the Iranian nuclear issue through diplomacy and sanctions could lead to military conflict, though he makes clear that everything possible must be done to avoid such a "catastrophic" outcome. Unlike his predecessor, he is open to the principle of imposing economic sanctions outside the context of the UN Security Council, if Russia and China are unwilling to go along. Also unlike Chirac, he has appealed to major French energy companies like Total and Gaz de France to stop investing in Iran.

On Iraq, the source of the greatest French-American dispute since the 1956 Suez crisis, Sarkozy has endorsed his predecessor's opposition to the war (while also arguing that Chirac's diplomacy was over the top). But he believes now is the time for France and America to put that dispute behind them. Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner—one of the few French politicians to have supported regime change in Iraq—traveled to Baghdad in August 2007 and announced that France was ready to play a role in international efforts to stabilize Iraq. More than any other so far, that gesture helped turn the page on a relationship that had deeply soured but now is on the road to repair.

At a time when majorities in all European countries—including France—are highly critical of U.S. foreign policy, it would be unreasonable to assume that longstanding difficulties in the French-American relationship are behind us. Still, the opportunity created by Sarkozy's election is historic. French foreign policy is driven from the Elysée, France's presidential palace, and the clear signal coming from that direction is that the era when France could be assumed to be America's most difficult ally in Europe is over.

Can it Work?

Will Sarkozy's ambitious plans to transform France succeed, or will they go up in smoke along with previous (and far less ambitious) efforts? The latter scenario is certainly plausible, but for all the inevitable difficulties he will face I think the stage has been set for a lasting presidency that will have a major impact. Sarkozy has already been compared to everyone from Napoleon to Margaret Thatcher, but a more apt, contemporary comparison might be Britain's Tony Blair. Like Sarkozy, the youthful Blair also challenged party and political "sacred cows" in his first months, and he was similarly accused of accumulating too much personal power, ignoring the parliament, manipulating the media, cozying up to dubious tycoons and aligning his country's foreign policy too closely with that of the United States. But Blair won three consecutive elections, destroyed his political opposition, modernized the British economy, passed major domestic reforms and helped Britain "punch above its weight" on the international stage. By the end, Blair had become deeply unpopular, particularly because his bold support for the Iraq war finally proved a bridge too far. But that was not until after he had lasted more than a decade in power and led his country through a period of major change.

Can Sarkozy make a similar run? I wouldn't bet against it—or against his chances of bringing about a minor revolution in France.