

interpretation

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Discussion

De Gaulle as a Political Thinker

On Morrissey's *Reflections on De Gaulle*

ANGELO M. CODEVILLA

Select Committee on Intelligence, United States Senate

Reflections on De Gaulle: Political Founding in Modernity. By Will Morrissey. (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1983. 210 pp.)

Charles de Gaulle, arguably more than any other political leader in this century, wrote in order to explain the basis of politics. Even before he became a statesman, he was a serious, systematic student of statecraft. He never stopped thinking of himself in such terms. Yet until Will Morrissey's *Reflections on De Gaulle* no book sought to understand de Gaulle as he understood himself.*

The book is aptly titled because it consists of distinct reflections. If overarching connections between the reflections exist, the author has hidden them too well. Hence, the book fails to give a coherent account of what de Gaulle teaches about political founding in modernity. The author so thoroughly mixes his own insight on this matter with the insights of de Gaulle, Machiavelli, and many others, and with observations on such diverse matters, that the result is a puzzle and the reader wonders whether the cause is chance or intention.

The book is divided into five parts. Each consists of one chapter explaining one of de Gaulle's major writings, and of another that uses the text as a point of departure for a substantive discussion of a topic suggested by it. This format is made to order for interpretation, since it allows one to separate elucidation of what a text *says* from what one believes it means and from substantive, autonomous discussion of the text's subject. The first of the five parts succeeds reasonably well. But, as the book goes on, it dissolves into an amorphous flow of quotes from a variety of sources, followed by what appears to be hermeneutics for its own sake.

*In 1983 the Institut Charles de Gaulle published *Approches de la philosophie politique du général de Gaulle* (Paris, Editions Cujas), the papers from a symposium held in April 1980. The papers bear titles such as "The notion of the universe in the thought of Charles de Gaulle," "The sources of Gaullist thought: popular nationalism and non-conformism in the nineteen-thirties," "The democratic dimension of Gaullism," "The Gaullist conception of the state's authority," etc. The essays are on a high level of abstraction. They do not analyze de Gaulle's texts closely. Though they approach de Gaulle's thought from a wide variety of viewpoints, they do not succeed in elucidating de Gaulle's own fundamental views on politics. Will Morrissey's *Reflections on De Gaulle* was also published that year.

The book is also marred by gratuitous, inconsequential remarks: Montesquieu is a “much greater French writer.” Stanley Hoffman is the best writer on de Gaulle. “Enough. It is only an aside . . .” Quoting de Gaulle that political leadership draws from the people what they have “of faith, and hope, and latent devotion,” the author inserts in brackets “What, no charity?” Then there is the annoying habit of dividing texts into chapters, sections, or pages, so as to locate a particular point at the *center* of something or other. Of course, depending on the criteria, almost any place is in the middle of something. The author seems content that, having so located a point, he has established its importance. This smacks of medieval numerology. Moreover, the book is sprinkled with little factual errors—for example, the revolution in Russia in February, 1917, was not the *Soviet* revolution. The editing leaves much to be desired. Nevertheless, because Morrissey is obviously perceptive, the book is worth reading.

The first part is on *La Discorde chez l'ennemi* (1924), a product of Captain de Gaulle's analysis, while a prisoner of war, of why Germany lost the Great War. Morrissey's description of *La Discorde* as “a manual of leadership” requires explanation. In the Great War, leadership was not lacking on either side. Quite the contrary. Like every other astute observer of that carnage, de Gaulle was stunned at how easily millions were led to make enormous sacrifices. The question that haunted de Gaulle was more concrete: Given such superb material and human resources, why did the German leaders lose? As the title suggests, the question resolved itself into: Why so much discord among the German leaders? The answer, in a nutshell, is that in Germany neither the political nor the military authorities stuck to their jobs. Any large enterprise depends for its success on a proper division of labor. Kaiser Wilhelm refused to act like a chief executive out of excessive regard for Admiral Tirpiz and the military expertise he represented. General von Kluck, for his part, refused to follow the orders of his superior, von Moltke, out of excessive esteem for his own position as field commander. De Gaulle notes that Nietzsche's notion of the Overman, and the consequent existentialist view that acts of will alone endow the world with meaning, was widespread in Germany and legitimized a generation's sacrifice of morals and good measure on the altar of success. No principle, not even love of country, was more authoritative than the imperative for self-fulfillment. Morrissey agrees with de Gaulle that “the German worship of success does not succeed.” In the end, as both de Gaulle and Morrissey observe, a society based on no principle but unbridled competitive striving not only risks failure, but is likely to disintegrate in the face of it.

Captain de Gaulle makes no obvious political suggestions here. Morrissey says that that is out of “a measured avoidance for overstepping one's place.” But the young Captain had said quite a lot. True, he had sounded the orthodox theme of the necessity of proper subordination: one man one job. But his repeated appeals to proportion, “*la Mesure*,” in the realm of high policy, and his lectures to his fellow prisoners of war decrying the waste of life on the battlefield, were obvious, pointed references to the fact that something was grievously wrong with the

conduct of the war on all sides. The proportion between what leaders asked of men and the goods these leaders sought seemed to be lacking. Though at the bottom of society men still gave their allegiance and their lives easily, those in charge were behaving in ways destructive of allegiance. In the lectures, Captain de Gaulle searched the realm of military tactics for something that might restore proportionality to the French Army's efforts. In *La Discorde* he searched the realm of high politics for the reasons why proportionality ceased to exist, at least in Germany. But in 1924 this brilliant young man was not yet ready to pass on his own beloved country the severe judgment he would later pass: for some reason, the people in charge are not up to their task.

The subject of the second part is *The Edge of the Sword*, a series of lectures to the École Supérieure de Guerre Major de Gaulle delivered in 1927. It starts with the premise that political leaders in general—and by implication those in France as well—are in the process of renouncing their responsibilities. They do so in part because they somehow don't understand them, or at least the role that force naturally plays in them. Morrissey is wrong to say that *The Edge* "contains a military 'philosophy' not a 'philosophy of life'." (Fortunately the terms are in quotation marks.) In fact, the book is about the requirements for political life. Its principal point is that, regardless of what anyone might wish, both authority and force are indispensable. If decent people no longer want to do what is necessary to run successful political enterprises, the initiative will pass to others. The objective conditions of modernity do not make impossible political and military success. Indeed, men are more disposed than ever to accept discipline. Yet mere assertion of rank or position is no longer sufficient to keep men together. De Gaulle lays out the paths which wise leaders can follow to success. They must embody objectives able to command a following. But he makes clear that knowledge of the way alone will not suffice. Intelligence cannot pierce the veil of human action. The will to live cannot be defined. However, its presence or absence is unmistakable. The best description of this undefinable element is Henri Bergson's concept of *élan vital*.

Morrissey's treatment of Bergson, outside of paraphrases of de Gaulle, is limited to an obscure comparison to Heraclitus and to an identification with the preference for offensive military operations. But it is simply wrong to treat this way the philosopher whose books always held the place of honor on de Gaulle's shelves. Bergson had nothing to say about military operations. Rather, he taught that words can at best describe, but cannot define, living things: "before philosophizing, one must live." Perhaps the most interesting feature of any organism is how it manages to make its living. As Charles de Gaulle grew older, and the twentieth century unfolded, his attention was drawn more and more to the primordial problem of political survival. Indeed it seemed that the nations of Europe were losing their grasp on the moral wherewithal for hanging together and surviving. Hence much of de Gaulle's written work is an investigation of this Bergsonian theme. What does it take for a people to do what is so natural, that is,

to live? But Morrissey misses what is surely the distinguishing feature of de Gaulle's political thought: its concentration on the simple, primordial problem of keeping the polity alive for action in history.

The fourth part deals with *France and Her Army*. This is not a book of military history. Rather it is an account of how France has drawn from herself the military effort that has made possible her life. Nothing could be further from the disembodied history of campaigns. The army reflects the spirit of the *Patrie* at any given time more finally than any other institution because, after all, it is the result of concrete choices about what is worthwhile, about what a people think about themselves and others around them. It also shows how serious a society is about surviving. How are the forces and their officers recruited? To whom do they answer? By what criteria are commanders judged? What moves it to fight? How adequate is the whole arrangement to the circumstances of the day? If ever a book was written as an illustration of the *élan vital* this is it. And what a colorful illustration it is! De Gaulle shows the reader the courageous but undisciplined knights who represented feudal France. He tells of the scientific, professional armies of Louvois and the *ancien régime*, and of the young conscript troops of the revolution led by officers who knew that, for the first time in their lives, competence alone was enough for personal success. Throughout, he touches the actual sources of human effort and sacrifice. How disappointing then to read Morrissey's abstract, scarcely relevant commentary, characterized by the following conclusion:

Thucydides and Montesquieu finally advocate their versions of what Aristotle calls a "polity" or mixed regime—that is, a regime in which democratic, monarchic, aristocratic, and oligarchic elements combine in a *concordia discors*. Such regimes—eventually unbalanced, corrupted, as surely as any pure democracy or oligarchy—nonetheless sustain themselves longer and (Aristotle would add) serve *humanitas* better than others.

Charles de Gaulle plainly thought that in the 1930s his country was not equipped to draw from itself an effort proportional to the Nazi menace.

In the fifth part, Morrissey says that the *War Memoirs* "chronicle the Gaullist quest for the grandeur of France," that France's defeat "corrupted the French military leadership" and that, while fighting with his division, he "decided to continue the war until the enemy's defeat." But he is wrong. A constant theme of the books and articles de Gaulle published prior to 1940 is the corruption of France's leadership. Another of his constant themes is his own identification with France, which, he supposed, wanted to live, as opposed to France's establishment, which did not care whether it lived or not. Let us now look at some length at the judgment of corruption that de Gaulle pronounces on France's establishment, and at the antidote that he chronicles in the *War Memoirs*.

By the mid-1930s it was clear to de Gaulle that Germany was in the hands of men who, however base, wanted victory so much that they were able to see

clearly how to achieve it. The German armed forces were being rebuilt to achieve as much as technology would allow. However, France's armed forces were being shaped not by the requirements for victory but by bureaucratic imperatives irrelevant to it.

Lieutenant Colonel Charles de Gaulle took it upon himself to draw up a plan for a mechanized corps of 100,000 men, which could blunt any German armored thrust (published as *Vers l'armée de métier*). He also took it upon himself to sell the plan to the country. He made numerous connections with politicians of the Left and Right, and saw his plan introduced as a bill in Parliament. The Army and the Ministry of Defense fought the plan in typical fashion. Marshal Pétain wrote that the new technology did not change the value of France's defensive preparations. General Weygand said that though the new technology was important, the Army already had it: "Nothing is to be done, all already exists." Finally the Minister of War, General Morin, solemnly declared to Parliament that the government is responsible for war plans, and that it deemed this plan foolish. In order to agree with Lieutenant Colonel de Gaulle against such illustrious military men, the Members of Parliament would have had to have enough intellectual self-confidence to look at the problem themselves and make their own decision. That would have required trusting the product of mental speculation more than the testimony of bemedaled men. It would also have required putting aside far more profitable and immediately pressing political tasks to do hard work and to possibly take the side of "nobodies" against the kind of people they regularly dined with. They renounced, by a large majority.

After Léon Blum became chief of the Popular Front government in 1936, this paragon of intellectual honesty called Colonel de Gaulle to his office for a long conversation. De Gaulle's ideas on mechanized warfare had made sense, and he wanted to argue them out personally. Besides, Hitler had just remilitarized the Rhineland, and there was a general eagerness to do something. After listening for a while, Blum said that there would be a lot more money for tanks and planes in the next budget. De Gaulle replied that he was aware of the plans, but that these were the wrong kinds of tanks and the wrong kinds of planes, and that the plans for using them were mindless. Blum countered that matters of equipment and strategy were the province of the military leaders and the Ministry of Defense. How could *he* judge such details? Just before the telephone rang again and took Blum's attention, de Gaulle reminded him that the Government was responsible for the nation's defense. Regardless of how much or how little technical expertise that might involve, the Government had to do its job.

Four years later, after the invasion of France was well under way and the newly-frocked Brigadier de Gaulle had been taken into Paul Reynaud's cabinet, several incidents occurred which further illustrate the military's and the political system's renunciation of responsibility. In the few days' pause before the final drive on Paris, General Weygand, who had taken over as Military Commander in Chief, was desperately searching for expedients that might save the situation. De

Gaulle told him that the remaining French tanks, planes, and a few infantry divisions should be pulled out of the line and constituted into two makeshift strike forces for a pincer attack on the expected German thrust toward Paris. If that failed, there should be mass movement of forces to North Africa. General Weygand rejected the ideas not for the sake of better ones (or worse ones for that matter) but simply because he was incapable of stepping outside the intellectual framework in which he had operated so long. The love of routine was proving stronger than the love of victory, honor, and freedom.

De Gaulle immediately suggested to Paul Reynaud that to keep a military commander who had stopped looking for victory made no sense. Reynaud agreed that Weygand should be replaced. But, three days before the Government had to leave Paris, even as documents were burning in the courtyards, Reynaud said he could not bear up under the political pressure of Weygand's friends. The French élites' attachment to one another proved stronger than their attachment to political existence.

On the very day that the government left Paris, Weygand, uninvited, burst into a meeting between Reynaud and de Gaulle, and demanded that the Government seek an armistice. De Gaulle objected. "Do you have anything to propose?" Weygand asked angrily. Significantly, the reply came from de Gaulle, the most junior man in the Government, rather than from the Premier: "The Government does not make suggestions, but rather gives orders. It will give them." Of course if the Government had had the intellectual and moral self-confidence to give such orders, it would not have suffered a military commander like Weygand. But Weygand, not de Gaulle, prevailed because, though he had neither ideas nor an official position in the Government, he was a member of the Establishment and de Gaulle was not.

Thus the final days of the Third Republic were its most typical—in the sense that they most truly revealed what it had become. De Gaulle, like many others, reports that the Government had an air of unreality about it. Ministers and Members of Parliament met and argued as usual, bureaucrats and representatives of interest groups sought favors, people jockeyed for position, journalists swarmed about the scene. Yet none of this could rescue the French people from its predicament because none of it was intended to. Each part of the nation's hierarchy—above all, the senior officers of the Armed Forces—was pursuing its own particular ends without any thought, hope, or faith in victory, without having measured the consequences of submission to the Nazis. Most leaders felt somewhat responsible for what was happening. But how could they change their objectives without fully accusing their own ways? The Premier, Paul Reynaud, and the President, Albert Lebrun, could have put in command of the Armed Forces men who wanted to win, but to do so they would have had to override the opposition of many high personages who were more attached to the present chiefs' high status than they were concerned with the outcome of the war. Reynaud resigned, and the high-ranking personages of the regime quickly surren-

dered to the Germans in the hope that they could continue to live pretty much as before.

The French people were thoroughly confused and downcast. They and their Parliament had given the Government everything it had asked by way of military supplies. They had been told their country was impregnable. Now it had been overrun. Their leaders—who had made possible the disaster—offered neither a satisfying explanation for what had happened nor any hope for the future. The Vichy Government's line was that the French people had neglected their Armed Forces and had committed various moral faults. The French people would now have to work diligently for their new masters under the discipline of their own military leaders, who had led them to defeat. Of course none of this rang true. The bonds of faith and hope which tie a people to its leaders, which articulate the various parts of a polity and make it capable of concerted action, had simply vanished. France had ceased to exist as an entity capable of collective action because its leaders had ceased to stand for anything which might compel allegiance.

On June 18, 1940, Charles de Gaulle was a junior Minister in a cabinet that had just resigned in favor of Pétain. When he flew to London in Churchill's plane, with 100,000 francs of secret funds given to him by Paul Reynaud, he hoped that he would be one among many French leaders, most more prominent than he, who would want to continue the war. When he spoke on the BBC, though he knew he was committing an act of rebellion, he thought he was raising a flag to which bigger names than his would rally. Churchill thought the same. Indeed de Gaulle immediately contacted the governors of the French colonies, asked them to continue the fight, and even offered to put himself at their orders. In his second speech from London he even flattered General Nogués, Governor of North Africa, by citing him in the same breath as the founders of the Empire. All was to no avail. Nogués remained faithful to Pétain, while the few governors who rallied, notably Indochina's General Catroux, were so uninspiring that they were unable to bring their colonial establishments with them. Only later would de Gaulle himself be able to rally French Equatorial Africa. De Gaulle was alone, and distraught to be so.

But de Gaulle's decision to take on the job that others had shunned did not depend on calculations of the odds. The job, the governance of France, was there, undone, demanding to be done. The leader is not necessarily the one with the title or the reputation. He is the one who actually does the job of leading the country. Most of his speeches from London, from the very first, were variations on a single theme: France's government had abandoned France. left her at the Nazis' mercy, depriving her not just of freedom but, more important, of hope. But France must not die. There is good hope of victory. If France struggles, it can do more than share in that victory. Above all it can affirm to itself that it is alive. He, de Gaulle, is speaking for France because no one else is in a position to do so. He is speaking on behalf of honor, good sense, and the interest of France. His third speech, right after Pétain signed the Armistice, is perhaps the

most typical: "This evening, I will simply say, *because somebody's got to say it* (emphasis mine), what shame, what revulsion arises in the hearts of good Frenchmen." France, he said ". . . knows, feels, that she deserves much better than the servitude accepted by the Bordeaux Government." Then he told his audience that there are in the world "a thousand immense material and moral forces which perhaps one day will arise to crush the enemies of liberty." Meanwhile, there must be, he said "an ideal," "a hope." He then promised French soldiers, wherever they might be, that together they would build the army which, together with France's allies, "will restore liberty to the world and greatness to the Fatherland."

Again and again he referred to himself as someone doing a job which has to be done, and that he was worthy of doing it only because in fact he *was* doing it. The people in Vichy, though they had titles, were not doing the job implied by those titles. On June 26, answering a nationwide speech by Pétain, he said, "Some voice has to answer you. This evening that voice will be mine." A few days later: "Well, since those who had the duty of wielding France's sword have let it fall, broken, I've picked up the hilt." On October 25, 1940: "Free Frenchmen! For the moment France is us. The honor of France is in our hands." He had no doubt that if France wanted to live, it would rally to those who represented life: "In the present immense turmoil, only those men count who know how to think, to want, to act, according to the terrible rhythm of events." France's great military chiefs "[are] anxious to see the whole world sink because they themselves have sunk . . ." (August 22). De Gaulle knew and argued that, by agreeing to subordinate itself to Nazism, a whole Establishment had effectively resigned its right to lead France. A new one would have to arise. In fact, "new men" did arise. Colonels Larminat and Leclerc and Felix Eboué took over the French Congo, Cameroon, and Chad respectively on behalf of Free France.

A revolution was occurring throughout metropolitan France as well. He had not deprived the élites of their authority. They had cast it away by not exercising it. Throughout the war the British Establishment, eventually joined by Churchill, continued to reproach de Gaulle because more illustrious French personages had not joined the movement. Perhaps if he were less rigid, alliances could be made.

. De Gaulle freely acknowledged that his style was rigid and could be characterized as extreme. But, he pointed out to his radio audiences as well as to the British Prime Minister, such authority as he had came exclusively from his total, unwavering public espousal of the cause of France. If he were seen to be compromising any of France's interests, either in favor of allies or in favor of "getting along" with people who had compromised themselves with Vichy, his bubble would burst. People did not follow him because of who his friends were or because of the favors he could give. Rather, they followed him because he represented, in his own person, what they wanted for their country. The moment he compromised his moral authority or the integrity of the view of France that he was propounding, he would be literally nothing. Indeed, de Gaulle was openly

scornful of the suggestion that his movement was worth less for being unadorned by big names. Recalling the wars of the Revolution, he reminded his French and British audiences that “France would always rather win its wars with General Hoche than lose them with Marshal de Soubise.” Alas, the various French élites had proved beyond a doubt that they preferred to lose with people of their own kind than to win with new men and new ideas.

Why had the French élites renounced their tasks? There were both moral and intellectual reasons. Above all, perhaps, the regime had fostered the prominence of men with no faith except in their wallets and no law except their own interests. How could such men comprehend the problem which Nazi Germany posed? How could they lead a fight for liberty if they did not love it? What could one expect of military leaders “whose sword does not burn at their side” when Paris, Strasbourg, and other areas are enslaved? Intellectually France’s leaders had gone astray because “they did not place themselves squarely before the problem at hand, the problem of victory.” They thought themselves too sophisticated, and failed to see that “directness is the greatest sophistication.” By his own standard, de Gaulle was certainly sophisticated.

The War Memoirs are an excellent primer on the basics of political life. In August 1944, Dwight Eisenhower and Franklin Roosevelt, not to mention Pétain, Weygand and Laval, learned firsthand what political founding in modernity could mean when Charles de Gaulle walked down the Champs-Élysées and a new regime was literally baptized by the joyful tears of most adult Frenchmen.

Yet—and this is our second main point—the first regime de Gaulle founded was so flawed its founder abandoned it, while the second, the Fifth Republic, ultimately pushed him aside. More significant for our purposes, de Gaulle’s writings are not nearly so enlightening about the essential details of political life as they are about the fundamentals. The *Mémoires d’espoir*, which cover the period between 1958 and 1969 and deal with de Gaulle’s stewardship of French society and the French State, are not of the same substantive or literary quality as the rest of de Gaulle’s works. Why they are not is an important question, about which we learn little in Morrisey’s book.

We can only suggest some answers. De Gaulle concentrated both his intellectual and his political energies on the restoration, maintenance and strengthening of the State. It is an exaggeration, but not much of one, to reduce his patriotism to a kind of worship of the State. He literally subordinated every political good to that one, and understood other political good in terms of it. Hence de Gaulle dealt with the Algerian war primarily as a threat to the cohesion of the State, even though doing so involved cutting off a part of the body politic, and accepting a defeat he had vowed not to accept. Hence also, inevitably, he translated his strong commitment to giving each citizen a stake in France into a laborious process that can best be described by the label “interest-group liberalism.” Morrisey is quite correct to note that nothing is more foreign to de Gaulle’s thinking than “interest-group liberalism.” Yet observers of the Fifth Republic

(including de Gaulle and Malraux in *Les Chênes qu'on abat*) invariably admit that its day-to-day business consists of nothing else.

De Gaulle concentrates on founding rather than on maintaining regimes in our times. But the truths and errors he writes on both subjects are all worth pondering. Morrisey has served political theory well by showing that de Gaulle, a bright man who wrote carefully, is worthy of being read attentively.