

Interpretation

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Daniel J. Mahoney, *De Gaulle: Statesmanship, Grandeur, and Modern Democracy* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), xii + 319 pp., \$55.00.

WILL MORRISEY

Unlike so many things in political life, commercial republicanism delivers on its promises. Splendid but exhausting, the martial aristocracies and monarchies that dominated Europe into the nineteenth century finally collapsed into the arms of the people, who confidently asserted that they could do better. Locke, Montesquieu, and the other great republicans looked forward to a world in which commerce and representative government would stanch the outflow of blood and treasure caused by rulers who would find quarrel in a straw, when honor's at the stake.

The republicans were right. Commercial republics don't fight—amongst themselves. What theorists could not fully anticipate was the dissatisfaction commercial republicanism would generate among its own most ambitious citizens. For some human beings all the time, and for most some of the time, peace and prosperity do not suffice. What the ancient Greeks called *thumos*—the spirited part of the soul, the part that gets angry, makes us courageous or rash, faithful or blindly loyal—does not rest contentedly in a commercial republican regime. *Thumos* wants heroism, conspicuous preferment instead of conspicuous consumption, the ways of the lion and the eagle. *Thumotic* souls pose a profound political and spiritual problem at any time, but never more so than here and now, in our 'embourgeoisied' modern times.

No statesman understood this better than Charles de Gaulle. As a young military officer in the years between the world wars, de Gaulle saw *thumos* pushed to the point of madness in neighboring Germany, while deploring, at serious cost to his own career, the poor-spirited response of his countrymen, including a military elite rotted with complacency and cowardice. After the war, he opposed the shallow, bureaucratized internationalism of the new-republican United States and its Eurosyphants. Throughout, de Gaulle proclaimed and embodied the virtues of political life and civil society—self-government—against the dehumanizing forces of technocracy and consumerism.

Daniel J. Mahoney's scholarship allies itself with civic virtue in a world not conspicuously receptive to it. In his previous book, *The Liberal Political Science of Raymond Aron*, Mahoney displayed a rare ability to take ample, rich materials and concentrate them into their essence, saying things at once helpful to the novice and illuminating to the specialist. He has now written the best first book to read on Charles de Gaulle. Those fascinated by his account will want to

go on to Jean Lacouture's generous biography, Stanley Hoffmann's *Decline or Renewal? France Since the 1930s*, André Malraux's *Anti-Memoirs* and *Felled Oaks*, and, above all, to the statesman himself, who wrote six books and several volumes of speeches.

The man of character, de Gaulle teaches, is a born protector. Without abandoning his critical independence, Mahoney guards de Gaulle's memory against a variety of cavils advanced in the spirit of smallness of soul: that he was a mystic or a Bonapartist, a crypto-fascist or a communist sympathizer, a Machiavellian, a Nietzschean, or a man of Weberian 'charisma.' None of the above, Mahoney firmly reminds us, but what can one expect from the denizens of an academic demiculture that has forgotten Aristotle's portrait of the great-souled man? Realists who know nothing of the realities, de Gaulle and Mahoney say, rightly.

Mahoney emphasizes de Gaulle's indebtedness to a real culture, the cultivation afforded by the France of de Gaulle's youth, with its fruitful if acrimonious tensions among Roman Catholicism, the Enlightenment, and post-Enlightenment 'German' ideology. Although the exact character of de Gaulle's religious convictions remains obscure—it had to, given his political intention to unite the French—Mahoney shows beyond dispute that de Gaulle understood France as part of the Europe that had been Christendom, and worth defending for the sake of the virtues Christendom cultivated.

De Gaulle "wanted to keep democracy and greatness together," Mahoney writes. No narrow democrat or egalitarian, de Gaulle saw what France lost when the Old Regime fell: moderation and the genuine courage moderation reinforces. A century and a half of too much and too little ensued. In founding the balanced regime of the Fifth Republic, with the strong executive the French needed, de Gaulle re-endowed French politics with stability, without sacrificing (Gaullists would say, by enhancing) genuine popular sovereignty. In aspiring to inculcate habits of civic participation in his countrymen, de Gaulle left them a legacy of resistance to bureaucracy and merely economic life, a legacy that might well be taken up by citizens who want to remain citizens and not subjects, in any country.

Perhaps most significantly, de Gaulle's life and writings show how a thumotic soul, the soul of a man or woman of character, might strengthen republicanism instead of subverting it, transcending the sterile adversarianism of modern elites, tending as they do to manipulation and tyranny, rule or ruin. Daniel Mahoney is a new kind of American scholar, one who views grandeur without malice, one who can see de Gaulle.