

The Legacy of President Jacques Chirac: The Art of Being Vague

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The tributes have been dripping in heavy praise: former French president Jacques Chirac and mayor of Paris, the great statesman; the man who said no to the US-led war juggernaut into Iraq; the man loved for being loved. Many of these should have raised the odd eyebrow here and there. "We French have lost a statesman whom we loved as much as he loved us," claimed current French president Emmanuel Macron.

When greatness is tossed around as a term in French commemorations, there is always a sense of merging the corporeal flesh with the non-corporeal state. The person thereby "embodies" France, inhabiting that rather complex shell that passes for a state. But the comparisons are all too loose and ready, showing an awkward accommodation.

Eulogies are often the poorly chosen instruments to express the mood of an occasion rather than the reality of a life. Given the crises facing the European Union, the pro-European sentiment of Chirac was cause for nostalgia. (He had encouraged a United Europe of States rather than a United States of Europe, moving France away from the Gaullist credo of self-sufficiency.)

"Europe is not only losing a great statesman, but the president is losing a great friend," [claimed](#) Jean-Claude Juncker, president of the European Commission in a statement.

Former Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt saw his Europhilia and interest in Europe as the making of the man, "the real statesman that we will miss."

Terms of amity were also reiterated by former French President François Hollande, whom Chirac had described in previous political battles as "Mitterrand's labrador".

"I know that today, the French people, whatever their convictions, have just lost a friend."

Smaller figures of history were also effusive in their praise: Boris Johnson, current British prime minister flailing in the Brexit imbroglio, [expressed his admiration](#) for that "formidable political leader who shaped the destiny of his nation in a career that spanned four decades"; one term UK prime minister John Major also doffed his cap.

Where Chirac excelled without question was in his role as political hypocrite (a kinder term would be political gymnast, or a weathervane, as he was sometimes associated with). Mayor of Paris for a touch under two decades, two stints as prime minister and two

presidential terms suggest ample opportunity to master it. It also suggests shifts, adjustments and moving across hardened political divisions, the pragmatist rather than the polemicist.

His costumery in that regard could be exquisite. He could readily give the "[le bruit et l'odeur](#)" address in 1991 yet become the anti-racist option in the 2002 election, in which shell-shocked progressives were urged to vote for the crook rather than the fascist, Jean-Marie Le Pen. In foreign affairs, he did something memorable: fabricate the image of France as suspicious of war and interventions, a peaceful state above reproach and self-interest. This enabled him to lead the anti-war effort against Iraq mounted by the United States and Britain in 2003.

The populist jab is worth noting for its current relevance: the terror of an overcrowded Europe, the fear of tax-payer funded marauders – often of the swarthy persuasion – that has been played upon from Nigel Farage in Britain to Viktor Orbán in Hungary. Imagine, posed Chirac, the humble French worker with his wife who sees next to his council house a father with three or four spouses with some twenty children all supported by welfare. "If you add to that the noise and the smell, well the French worker, he goes crazy."

He was also a creature of a brand of politics that would wear against the regulations. Mountainous ambition will do that to you, and the rust on Le Bulldozer was bound to be discovered at some point. In 2011, he was handed a two-year suspended sentence on two counts of embezzling public funds, something he did during his time as Paris's mayor. The specifics centred around the creation of fake jobs at his RPR party and suggested no grand scheme of self-enrichment. Even after his conviction, Chirac the amiable, Chirac the admired, was a theme pressed home [by his lawyer](#), Georges Kiejman. "What I hope is that this ruling doesn't change in any way the deep affection the French feel legitimately for Jacques Chirac." Kiejman had little reason to worry.

While hardly virtuoso, he advanced the uncomfortable question of French complicity in Nazi crimes, the otherwise great untouchable subject of post-war identity. The measure was significant, sinking, at least in some way, the notion that the French republic somehow retained its purity in abolition during German occupation and Vichy rule. That rule had resulted in a mutant political creation and monster; France the Republic could not be blamed, having ceased to exist. As former French President François Mitterrand [claimed](#), rather unconvincingly, "In 1940, there was the French state, this was the Vichy regime, it was not the Republic." Mitterrand, as with many in his position, did not feel an urging to join the French resistance till 1943; prior to that, he had been a civil servant in Vichy.

On July 16, 1995, Chirac [noted](#) how "the criminal folly of the occupiers was seconded by the French by the French state." In July 1942 in the Vel' d'Hiv roundup, 13,000 Parisian Jews were arrested by 4,500 French police in preparation for their murderous end in Auschwitz. "France, the homeland of the Enlightenment and of the rights of man, a land of welcome asylum, on that day committed the irreparable." The country had broken "its word, it handed those who were under its protection over to their executioners."

Court historians will be kept busy wondering about the man's ideologies and beliefs. They will ponder legacies left, and things unachieved. Structural and social divisions, for instance, remained unaddressed. With Chirac, appearances and demeanour had their distorting effects. Chirac, [wrote](#) French journalist Anne-Élisabeth Moutet, sported a "forceful

manner” that concealed “terminal policy indecision”. While leaving no lasting legacy, he had one up over the current, struggling leader. Despite being a chateau-owner, in the pink as far as the bourgeoisie was concerned, and married to an aristocrat, he had the common touch. For Professor Pascal Perrineau of the Paris School of International Affairs, [he was](#) a president who jogged and rode a Vespa, and appreciated for that fact. His lasting skill, however, was to immortalise the art of being vague in politics.

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