

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 12
Number 1 *Parameters* 1982

Article 1

7-4-1982

MITTERRAND'S THORN: THE PCF

Stephen Aubin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

Recommended Citation

Stephen Aubin, "MITTERRAND'S THORN: THE PCF," *Parameters* 12, no. 1 (1982), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.1277.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

MITTERRAND'S THORN: THE PCF

by

STEPHEN AUBIN

As François Mitterrand's first year in office as President of France came to a close in the spring of 1982, a not altogether predictable calm seemed to mark French-American relations. French support for the Sinai peacekeeping force had been enthusiastically welcomed, and somewhat unexpected. Perhaps the swift offer by the United States of logistical support for the French-initiated African peace force in Chad had been a sign of reciprocation and gratitude. Unfortunately, differences over Third World issues, which were initially downplayed, could yet become a source of friction. French military aid to Nicaragua has been the first manifestation of the divergent policy approaches taken by Paris and Washington toward Latin America. Nonetheless, fundamental agreement on a hard-line stand vis-à-vis Moscow could serve as the centerpiece for a less confrontational period in French-American relations. In this regard, France has recently appeared to many US observers as a lone island of realism in what is otherwise sometimes perceived as a neutralist-pacifist European sea.

Despite these encouraging signs, if US policymakers are to truly understand French perspective, a sensitivity to French domestic politics is essential. While conceding certain cosmetic changes, most analysts see considerable continuity in France's foreign and defense policies; to postulate a similar continuity with regard to domestic policies, however, would be to ignore reality.

François Mitterrand and Ronald Reagan were both elected to alter the status quo. Domestically, however, they are taking their

countries down divergent philosophical paths: the United States is moving toward a conservative reassertion of the merits of capitalism while France marches toward a more state-controlled socialist economy. In both countries the most recent national election overturned the dominant philosophy regarding the solution of society's ills. Such tumultuous elections engender much hope among the people because change seems assured. But the great expectations of the citizenry are seldom met with sufficient speed, if at all. Reagan was attacked and blamed for deteriorating economic conditions even before his program went into effect. Similarly, Mitterrand must deal with high expectations in an environment that has become somewhat more sober since the initial jubilation after his election victory of May 1981.

In Mitterrand's case, possible opposition from the left may prove more devastating than that from the rightist establishment that his reforms so threaten. The focus of politics on the left over the last decade has centered around the state of relations between Mitterrand's Socialist Party and Georges Marchais' Communist Party (the PCF). These relations will continue to be important to the accomplishment of Mitterrand's goals and, consequently, to the maintenance of his popularity with the electorate.

Historically, the French Communist Party has fluctuated between the pursuit of alliance politics with other parties of the left and the pursuit of sectarian policies typical of a Stalinist party occupying

a political ghetto. The signing of the Common Program of Government between the Communist and Socialist parties in 1972 heralded an era of hope for both Mitterrand and Marchais. After the stunning defeat of a divided left in the presidential election of 1969, both men saw that the only path to power was in alliance; each had different ends in mind, however. Mitterrand, after skillfully manipulating the various factions of the Socialist Party into a cohesive unit, hoped to whittle away at the Communist base while establishing a left under his control. Marchais, leading the stronger of the two parties in 1972, hoped to increase the strength of the Communists so that when national power was achieved a true socialist transformation would occur.

Unfortunately for Marchais, in a matter of five years the Socialist vote went from five percent to 32 percent of the total number of votes being cast.¹ As the 1978 legislative elections approached, it became apparent that if the left gained power, the Communist Party would be the junior partner in the coalition. For a true communist party, however, such an arrangement would have been unacceptable. When Marchais saw the writing on the wall, he decided to precipitate a rupture in the alliance that up to that point had represented so much hope for the left.

The French Communist Party's decision in 1978 to go its own way, however, should have surprised no one, for—despite image-building to the contrary—the party never abandoned its fundamental communist identity. The Eurocommunism of the 1970s led many observers to link the democratic rhetoric emanating from these West European parties with substantive change—a false impression. During a time when many of the parties chose the electoral path to power instead of the revolutionary path, several characteristics at the heart of a communist party's identity remained unaltered—the structure of democratic centralism, the role of the vanguard, and the commitment to a revolutionary transformation of society. In addition, the French Communist Party had consistently maintained close links to Moscow.

At the 22d Congress of the French Communist Party in February 1976, Marchais had perhaps already voiced the party's view concerning its relative position of power in an alliance with the Socialists:

To lead the country out of the crisis, uphold the workers' cause today so that it shall triumph tomorrow, vanquish the big bourgeoisie today and prevent it from encroaching on the people's democratic choice tomorrow, we must have a stronger, more influential and active Communist Party. That is the decisive condition for the triumph of socialism in France.²

In the wake of the defeat of the French left in 1978, the facade of liberalism present in the PCF during the years of alliance politics quickly gave way to the realities of totalitarian control. Marchais took the reins and attempted to stifle any dissension resulting from the defeat. Certain voices of dissent did emerge both from the right and the left wings of the party. Nevertheless, Marchais remained in firm control of the apparatus and continued his policy of open attack on the Socialists, hoping to regain the dominant position on the French left by weakening and discrediting the Socialist Party.

Marchais' policy of confrontation with Mitterrand's party had to be tempered a bit with the approach of the 1981 presidential election. After all, it was beginning to look as if Mitterrand was more the adversary than Giscard. Once the campaign got underway,

Stephen Aubin is currently under contract with the Defense Department writing for the *Friday Review of Defense Literature* and editing the Foreign Media edition of *Current News*. He is concurrently completing requirements for an advanced degree in national security studies at Georgetown University, where he completed his undergraduate degree work in international relations and French. He has also studied at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. Mr. Aubin holds a commission as a second lieutenant in the US Army Reserve and will enter the Army on active duty this summer.



appearances changed only slightly, however; Marchais seemed to be fighting Giscard while simultaneously attempting to undermine Mitterrand. It was Marchais' hope that Giscard would be reelected, throwing the Socialist Party into disarray and facilitating the reestablishment of the Communist Party as the dominant opposition party of the left. Unfortunately, Mitterrand stunned Marchais in the first round by exceeding Marchais' total vote by 10 percentage points. Thus Marchais, who had been indirectly attacking Mitterrand, was in a precarious position, particularly in light of Mitterrand's statements about not including Communists in a Socialist government. Marchais was caught in a tactical snare: if he refused to support Mitterrand in the second round, he would be accused of sabotaging the left once again; if he supported Mitterrand, he could not count on any commitments beforehand from Mitterrand with regard to the spoils of a Socialist victory. Mitterrand's victory in the second round, with the unconditional support of the Communist Party, dealt a humiliating blow to Marchais.

As the legislative elections approached, Marchais hoped to gain some bargaining leverage over Mitterrand by a strong showing in the first round. That did not occur. Desperate, Marchais began threatening strikes if the Communists were not included in the Mitterrand government. But Mitterrand held firm in continuing to declare that he would not include Communists in his cabinet. Perhaps such declarations reassured the electorate, or perhaps Marchais had abruptly changed course one time too many. At any rate, Mitterrand went on to gain a solid working majority of Socialists in the Assembly.

In light of these developments, the question might be asked, why did Mitterrand install four Communist ministers in his cabinet? The corollary to this question is, of course, why did Marchais agree to a subordinate role? There are several reasons why Mitterrand seemingly changed his mind. First, one must consider the left wing of Mitterrand's party, under Jean-

Pierre Chevènement, now Minister of Research and Technology. Alliance with the Communists adds to Mitterrand's leftist credentials. Second, and much more important, are the Communist Party's links to the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), the largest trade union movement in France. Mitterrand hopes to buy at least some time by keeping the CGT off-balance through Communist participation in government. Third, there are the municipal elections in 1983, in which Mitterrand would like to make further inroads into Communist strongholds—what better way than through alliance? Last, Mitterrand, a shrewd politician, probably hopes to further exacerbate the internal tension within the Communist Party by implicating the Communists in a plan that does not at all measure up to the revolutionary designs of communism. Mitterrand did not appoint Communist ministers to any of the ministries in which major reforms will occur. Furthermore, the appointment of Jean Le Garrec to be in charge of nationalizations was a clear victory for the moderates in the Socialist Party. Nationalizations have always been a major bone of contention between the Socialists and Communists. The appointment of Le Garrec moves the Socialist position even farther from that of the Communists. On the foreign policy front, Mitterrand continues to pursue a hard-line policy toward the Soviets, a policy that not only goes against the grain of Marchais' Communist Party but could cause problems for him with the pro-Moscow wing of the party.

Why would Marchais allow himself to be put in such a position? First, Marchais is caught in a balancing act between the hard-liners and those who have always supported the strategy of an alliance of the left. The hard-liners are in the minority among the party intellectuals, but they occupy strong positions in the CGT. Despite the popularity of the alliance strategy within the party, fundamental issues that the hard-liners constantly raise, such as support for Moscow, are still popular with the party base. After his defeat, Marchais needed some way to increase his prestige; the fact that the

Communist ministers will be under his control provides the means. And a precedent furnished by the newly formed provisional government back in 1944 illuminates the path. At that time, Communist ministers served as a spearhead for Communist Party disagreements with government policy. Thorez, the Communist Party leader, was then able to emerge as the arbiter between De Gaulle and the ministers, thereby heightening his own image in the eyes of both De Gaulle and the Communist Party.³

A further reason for Marchais' acceptance of a subordinate role is that the alliance is necessary in the short-run for Marchais and his party:

Maintaining their position at the heart of a large number of municipalities is vital: it means parallel circuits of financing and personnel recruitment—this battle for the municipalities can only be fought in tandem with the [Socialist Party].⁴

Once the Communist Party's strength is sustained at its base, it can move to a role of opposition, attempting to establish itself as the party of the left once again. One major actor in this hoped-for play of events will be the CGT. The CGT believes that it will not recover the members it has lost during the past three years by playing along with the government but, rather, by criticizing the timidity of certain Socialist reforms.⁵ As was pointed out in a recent article in *Le Nouvel Observateur*,

The PCF is in the government by necessity: thus, it is the CGT which will have to become temporarily the spearhead of the working class. The PCF press will grant it more space very soon; the group at the rue de La Fayette [the CGT] will have to issue challenges which might one day strain relations with the government.⁶

Recently, Marchais has been attempting to refute claims that the Communist Party will remain in government for only a short time, though most of his statements have a hollow ring to them. With regard to the

party's stance toward voters on the left, Marchais has stated:

Some 4.5 million men and women did [vote for Communist proposals]. That is positive. But the majority wanted less. I think they were wrong but you must be democratic and we are democrats. Consequently, we simply will implement what the French people want.⁷

In the same interview, Marchais spoke of how he welcomed the great debate to come at the next party congress in February 1982. He added, "I hope that each party member will take part in it with a spirit of responsibility."⁸ This spirit of responsibility did reign at the party congress, particularly after Marchais had expelled 30 dissidents who had formed a group called "Communist Encounters."⁹ The group had questioned internal party democracy and thus the very structure and identity of the party.

Another event of significance to the fortunes of the Communist Party and the Socialist Party alike will be the replacement of Georges Séguy as head of the CGT by Henri Krasucki, a hard-liner who voted against having Communists in the government. Krasucki is devoted to the Communist Party and will be far less independent on certain issues than Séguy. His succession at the CGT will reassure militants in the CGT and in the Communist Party as well. Both the reassertion by Marchais of hard-line policies in the Communist Party and the emergence of Krasucki as head of the CGT pose future problems for Mitterrand.

Moreover, serious underlying disagreements between the Socialists and the Communists could invite governmental crisis at any time.¹⁰ Nuclear power remains a divisive issue. The Communist Party has always been an avid supporter of nuclear power, and the initial reevaluation of the program by Mitterrand provoked opposition from the CGT, acting as the spearhead for the party. On the other hand, the Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail, a Socialist-leaning trade union, is opposed to any continuation of the present nuclear

program. Nationalizations, however, remain the center of attention. The Socialists are not moving quickly enough for the militants in the Communist Party or those in the left wing of the Socialist Party. On the other hand, the government is facing a legislative battle on nationalization that has been typified by what Jean Le Garrec calls "systematic obstruction" by the opposition.¹¹ As the Socialists attempt to change existing laws, each move encounters some sort of opposition on the right.

Finally, it is necessary to call attention once more to the possible foreign policy confrontation that could take place with the Communists if Moscow's policies are attacked by Mitterrand. Tension has been apparent over the continued imposition of martial law in Poland. Marchais insists that the differences in policy between the Socialist and Communist Parties will have no serious effect on the ability of the four Communist ministers to function as members of Mitterrand's government, but he continues to show inclinations toward a solid allegiance to Moscow's line. Mitterrand, on the other hand, has been steadfast in his condemnation of the martial law imposed in Poland. Indeed, he was one of the few Western leaders to give open support to the Reagan Administration's international airing of the film "Let Poland Be Poland." If the Polish situation worsens in any way, the dissolution of the present Socialist-Communist alliance in France is a possibility.

In Mitterrand's own backyard, underlying currents in the Socialist Party, although muted, were present at the recent Socialist Congress at Valence.¹² Mitterrand now finds himself leader of all the French, not just the Socialist Party. Consequently, he must now depend on Lionel Jospin as head of the party to keep various factions behind him. The role of French President is bound to cause conflict from time to time with the Socialist Party faithful. For the Socialist Party, the question becomes one of where to draw the line between solidarity for Mitterrand and independence of action. The role of governing and im-

plementing programs is far more difficult than that of opposition.

Some have contended that the failure of the Socialists to win any of the four contested seats in the parliamentary by-elections in January, and then their showing in the local council elections held in March, may signal a general disapproval of Mitterrand's performance thus far. Although the by-election results were demoralizing at a time when the Socialist Party found itself in the midst of difficult legislative battles, the vote percentages were not that extraordinary and cannot be accurately used as a measure of Mitterrand's present popularity. Essentially, the vote distribution was quite normal for the particular seats involved. The edge that Socialist candidates had experienced in June at the time of the last legislative elections was only the manifestation of a coattail effect immediately following Mitterrand's presidential victory and was now dissipated. Furthermore, the candidates of the right displayed a unity that was not present in June, while the Communists simply abstained, denying the Socialists needed support. The Communists may have wanted to remind Mitterrand of their usefulness in the coalition. Overall, the loss of the four seats is not that significant; as it stands, the Socialists still have 284 seats, followed by the Gaullists with 90, the Giscardists with 63, the Communists with 44, and 10 unaffiliated.¹³ Mitterrand still possesses a formidable working majority.

That parliamentary majority was not affected by the March local council elections, in which the conservative opposition won 51.5 percent of the vote, compared to the Socialist-Communist alliance's 47.5 percent. Some contend, however, that the results confirm a swing in popular opinion against Mitterrand's policies. The Socialists prefer to stress their own party's reasonably good showing, pointing out that they won 30 percent of the vote this year, compared to 28.8 percent in the 1979 local elections.¹⁴

As evidenced in the by-elections, the Communists are still a force to be reckoned with. Links to the major trade union underscore their importance. Mitterrand's

caution and pragmatism have irked the CGT, but not enough to provoke major strikes. Maintaining the delicate balance between the Communists, the unions, and the factions of his own party, while attempting to stave off the opposition, will continue to exact the best of Mitterrand's political skills.

Much, however, may depend on how Mitterrand's economic program fares. The right continues to resist changing an economy which, in their eyes, has worked perfectly well. The Communists want reforms to move more quickly. Jacques Delors, the Finance Minister, is very capable but has encountered resistance from the French Employers Association. A good portion of the economic program relies on the willingness of business to invest in designated areas in order to create new jobs, and the level of investment depends greatly on the confidence of the business community.

Many parallels are evident in the Reagan and Mitterrand presidencies. Just as President Reagan has failed to reassure the financial markets because of the huge deficits that are being projected, so too will President Mitterrand face obstacles in his attempts to instill confidence in his own new approaches. A mutual French-American understanding of the pressures each government is contending with in the domestic arena might help to

temper the inevitable disagreements that will surface on the international level, while increasing the benefits to be derived from areas of mutual agreement.

NOTES

1. Flora Lewis, "The French Alliance: Too Much Leftist Pressure," *The New York Times*, 25 September 1977, sec. 3, p. 3.
2. Andre Vieuguet, "Vanguard Role in the Mass Movement," *World Marxist Review*, 19 (July 1976), 54.
3. Branko Lazitch, "Le précédent de 1944," *L'Express*, 3 July 1981, p. 30.
4. Michel Charmard, "PCF Revival Hopes: Local, Proportional Elections," *Valeurs Actuelles*, 27 July-2 August 1981, p. 17.
5. Jean-Pierre Gonguet, "The CGT: First Criticisms of the Government," *Le Matin*, 8 July 1981, p. 9.
6. C. F. Julien, "CGT: The Plan of the Tough," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 4 July 1981, p. 28.
7. Yve Mourousi and Patrice de Carolis, interview with Georges Marchais on French television, printed in *L'Humanité*, 14 September 1981, p. 3.
8. Ibid.
9. "PCF on Expulsion of 'Communist Encounters' Group," *L'Humanité*, 2 October 1981, p. 3.
10. Arthur Conte, "PC-PS Conflicts: Nuclear, Military, Immigrants," *Paris Match*, 28 August 1981, p. 32.
11. Sylvie Pierre-Brossolette, "La patience selon Mauroy," *L'Express*, 30 October 1981, p. 34.
12. Jacques Roure, "Les dissonances de Valence," *L'Express*, 6 November 1981, p. 33.
13. "Socialists Lose in Parliamentary ByElections," *Agence France-Presse*, 17 January 1981.
14. Paul Lewis, "French Conservatives Gain In Vote for Local Councils," *The New York Times*, 15 March 1982, p. A3.

