

On French foreign policy - Why Is Emmanuel Macron Being So Nice to Donald Trump?

Sunday 23 July 2017, by [GOPNIK Adam](#) (Date first published: 14 July 2017).

Watching the strange dance of Donald Trump and Emmanuel Macron in Paris—the meal at the restaurant in the Eiffel Tower that no Parisian ever goes to, the buddy-buddy press conference in which the fears of Trump’s Parisphobic friend “Jim” were finally laid to rest—the motives of the two men might have seemed mixed, if not baffling. Trump’s seemed obvious enough: he wanted to be treated like a big shot, something that he still needs, even after having become the biggest of shots, and he got to watch a cool parade with lots of soldiers and tanks. In exchange, he said some positive things about Macron and France—which, he seemed to discover while reading his speech, was America’s first ally. Macron’s purposes may be trickier to untangle, though they, too, are pretty clear once the knot of French politics is untied.

A lot of people misunderstood, or misrepresented, Macron’s victory in the French Presidential election—about as many, probably, as misunderstood and misrepresented Trump’s victory here, and for a not entirely dissimilar reason. Macron was celebrated for breaking a stranglehold on the French Presidency that was supposedly held by the two mainstream parties: the Republicans and the Socialists. In fact, the Republican Party has only been around for a few years, one in a long series of rapidly renamed and reorganized parties that have always been essentially alike: more or less Gaullist on foreign policy, more or less traditionalist on internal matters, and—unlike their American equivalents, and to their undying credit—always staunchly against the extreme ethnic-nationalist wing represented by the Le Pens, père et fille. (The Bannons and Millers are left far outside the French big tent.)

The last three conservative Presidents belonged to different parties. Valéry Giscard D’Estaing represented the National Federation of Independent Republicans. Jacques Chirac was the leader of the Rally for the Republic. Nicolas Sarkozy was the head of the Union for a Presidential Majority, and later the Republicans, a party specially conceived for his post-Presidential rebound, which didn’t work out. But these parties all belong to the same family, which is the only kind of political grouping that matters in France—a jumbler, constantly reanimated group of sects and subsects, warring and feuding and dividing, as families tend to do.

The conservative family, like its counterpart on the left, has remained more or less intact—if it is, for the moment, leaderless—at least since the time of the Paris Commune, and perhaps since the Revolution. On the left, the Socialist Party was a minor player much in the shade of the Communists until the nineteen-sixties, when François Mitterrand set it up as his personal vehicle. It has run into a deep and well-deserved depression recently, but no one doubts that the larger leftist family, which is still hugely influential in the media and education, will continue. “In France, legitimacy lies always on the left,” the not-very-left philosopher Pascal Bruckner says. Indeed, one of the challengers that Macron faces is Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who emerged as the leader of the hard left in the last election, and who traces his heritage back to the great Jean Jaurès. Mélenchon runs a party specially made for him, La France Insoumise. Lying in wait for Macron to attempt economic reform, Mélenchon’s real challenge will come in the streets, when autumn’s manifestations begin.

Nor is Macron's centrist faction some kind of nebulous, squishy middle third way without creed or heritage. Indeed, French centrism is so well defined that it has long had its own party, the Mouvement Démocrate, or MoDem, run by the veteran politician François Bayrou, who has ducked in and out of ministries in various governments, and would have been Macron's justice minister had he not had to step aside because of a threatened political scandal. The centrist heritage traces directly to the late Michel Rocard, a Mitterrand Prime Minister of clear social-democratic (as opposed to straight socialist) tendencies, who is generally thought to be the best President France never had—though some would bestow that honor on the center-right Édouard Balladur. Rocardians—Macron's Prime Minister, Édouard Philippe, is another of this stamp—believe in free markets tightly regulated and controlled by government oversight, public services that are not allowed to become too centralized or inefficient, and a generally anti-dogmatic and intellectual slant to politics, which treats the problems of the country as specific modalities rather than abstract models. (I once appeared on a French TV show with Rocard, during the Clinton Administration scandals. Rocard was one of those men—Al Gore is, perhaps, another—who were far more impressive in private than in public, oozing intelligence and seductive charm, which explains both the high expectations and the failures.)

Macron, however, believes that he has found the main flaw in French social-democratic pragmatism, and the reason that it has rarely before achieved, or long held, power. It is that the centrist tradition lacks the dignified appearance of the kind of "regal" authority that the French still find essential in a President. France has been a Colbertian state (not Stephen, but the seventeenth-century minister Jean-Baptiste). As long as there has been a France, the model of government has been highly centralized, with strong authority located in Paris. Even the Republic we celebrate on July 14th shares the regal DNA. The Presidency of the Fifth Republic was designed by Charles de Gaulle to have the trappings and the atmosphere of royalty: the French President is a non-genetic king. After three consecutive rois fainéants, or weak kings, Macron is trying to combine the practicality of Rocardian politics with the royalist spell of Gaullist ambitions—that's why he bizarrely refers to wanting his Presidency to be Jupiter-like. He means that he will have Olympian affect to go along with his pragmatic plans.

That is also why he is playing, well, the Trump card. The Gaullist tradition has tended not to appear reflexively anti-American but, rather, to allow French Presidents to deal with American Presidents on terms of equality—or, at least, cosmetic equality—as de Gaulle did with Kennedy, and Mitterrand did with Reagan, despite the discrepancy in their relative power. There has never been a more opportune moment for that than now, with America so clearly in decline in the eyes of the rest of the world, and Trump more isolated every day. Macron seems to believe that he has detected in Trump the same vulnerability that Obama thought he had: an absence of any beliefs or ideology, and a persona that turns on a desperate desire to be liked. Anyone who flatters Trump and treats him respectfully gets his good opinion and coöperation in return. (Canada's Justin Trudeau is playing this card, too.) Since Trump seems to view life as a series of small brutal ballets of dominance—exemplified in comic form by his ongoing struggle with Macron for the superior handshake—Macron seems to imagine that he can be easily manipulated to France's benefit.

This will play well domestically in France but will almost certainly turn out to be an illusion. Trump's tendency to be irritated by a perceived slight is greater even than his capacity to be ingratiated. That, after all, is what distinguishes Trump's narcissism from the normal political egotism of, say, Bill Clinton, who cannot believe that people dislike him even when they do. If Macron imagines that Trump will maintain fond memories of dinners shared and parades watched, he is deluding himself. Narcissists can be manipulated for a moment, but they can't be managed. Even as they watch a parade, they manage to make themselves miserable—their memory for slights felt is far greater than their memory for sights seen.

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P.S.

* The New Yorker. July 14, 2017:

<http://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/why-is-emmanuel-macron-being-so-nice-to-donald-trump>

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