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Book Review by John Zvesper

**Mission Impossible**

*France: A Modern History from the Revolution to the War with Terror*, by Jonathan Fenby.

St. Martin’s Press, 576 pages, $29.99

“**My starting point is certainly not that of a Francophobe,**” Jonathan Fenby once professed, “rather more of a lover who entertains some fundamental worries about the object of his affection.” A British journalist and former newspaper editor who served as correspondent in Paris for Reuters and the *Economist*, Fenby has written about France for more than 50 years. His new book—*France: A Modern History from the Revolution to the War with Terror*—includes sections on French literary, artistic, and scientific achievements, all of which contribute to the country’s allure. But the book is primarily about France’s political history. In its politics, France has been less alluring.

Fenby’s narrative moves from the “lasting legacy” of the 1789 Revolution to mid-2016. Many of his worries about French politics are bound up with what he sees as the main theme running through post-Revolutionary history: France has taken “its revolutionary and republican legacy as constituting its core values,” but has never “fully digested that heritage because it has never wanted to shed its other, more conservative character.”

But there is a problem with this formulation. Quite a bit of the Revolution’s legacy is rightly seen as indigestible. The recipe was wrong: too much force and too little reflection and choice; too much Rousseau and not enough Montesquieu. Fenby has to specify that it is only “the ‘good’ elements of the Revolution”—not its totalitarian tendencies and its culmination in Napoleon’s wars and dictatorship—that constitute the “republican ideal.”

Given the revolution’s questionable character as founding event, could there be other candidates for the role? Fenby’s admirably comprehensive coverage of French politics provides some food for this thought. Rather than “harking back” to their First or Second Republics (which combined lasted fewer than 15 years), the French could make more of their first durable republic, the Third (which lasted from 1870 until the fall of France in 1940). Fenby sees plenty of human frailties and political shortcomings in Third Republic politicians and policies, like colonialism. Nevertheless, he sums up the polity as “at heart a moderately conservative regime.” “The path of rational prudence, which was the regime’s hallmark, took account of change but was not going to be swept along by it wherever the pressure came from.”

Fenby criticizes the Third Republic for the absence of party discipline among its legislators, who could “form ad hoc coalitions to block bills and look after the interests of their voters and their own careers, toppling ministries at no political cost and reducing most governments to the role of reflecting parlia-
Fenby prepared this American edition of his book during "eighteen months of terror," a surge of Islamic terrorist attacks from January 2015 to July 2016. His new Prologue ("A Republic at War") describes these attacks, which killed more than 260 people. (Since August 2016, a dozen less deadly attacks have resulted in the death of a single policeman, killed on the Champs-Élysées in April.)

President Hollande declared a state of emergency within hours of the November 2015 attacks (130 deaths). This declaration facilitated searches, seizures of arms, and arrests, and made it possible to shut down places of worship (along with other places of assembly) where there have been incitements to terrorism. The state of emergency was meant to be temporary, but has been renewed several times and will stay in place at least until November 2017. By then, President Macron plans (insofar as the Constitutional Council permits) to replace it with a new security law that will allow slightly watered-down versions of the measures now temporarily allowed under the state of emergency.

Fenby observes that it is "hard to see when the terrorist danger" will "ebb" in France, partly because "most of the terrorists and their helpers had been born and brought up in France or Belgium." In 2016, police listed 11,700 people in France "as having links to terrorism," which many of the young, though citizens born in France, do not feel French. Mirroring this fact, a recent national poll (cited in the book) finds that 54% of respondents thought France has too many immigrants, and 45% agreed that "we no longer feel at home in France."

In response to the 2015 terrorist attacks, the government "announced the launch of civic education courses in schools aiming to strengthen patriotism, respect for all religions and the country's secular tradition." This strategy's success depends on all citizens, old and new, understanding more fully the meaning of political liberty and equality. If liberal democratic leaders and teachers are too vague or imprecise about these things, a confident educational strategy is unlikely to be established. In any case, it may be too late. As Fenby warns, with "rising ethnic, cultural and religious tensions, education [has become] a battleground far removed from the original ideal of it being the unifying cornerstone of the Republic."
In 2016 terrorism became the most
dramatic reason for contemporary
French gloominess (morosité), but it was
not the only reason. In fact, terrorist attacks
(at least briefly) make the country more unit-
ed “around the values of the Republic,” and
decrease political leaders’ unpopularity. A
week after the January 2015 attacks in Paris,
President Hollande’s popularity doubled—
to 40%!

But even if the French Republic were not
at “war with terror,” since the 1990s there has
been a “decline in national self-confidence” in
a nation that always sees itself as “a beacon
to the world.” Fenby explains this decline
partly in terms of the weakening of tradi-
tional French ways of life by the intrusion of
modernity (for example, by the proliferation
of fast-food outlets), but mainly in terms of
economic weaknesses: little or no growth,
high unemployment, large government bud-
get deficits, and the political difficulty of es-
ablishing labor market reforms that could
make hiring and firing easier. Fenby is open
to reforms to unblock the French economy,
if they were politically possible. He is not
tempted by the contemporary rise (in France
and elsewhere) of economic nationalism and
protectionism.

President Macron’s ideas for economic
policy (labor law reforms, corporation tax
reduction, and a Nordic-style combination of
spending cuts with a stimulus package) are not
particularly original. What will be original is
if Macron overcomes the political opposition
organized to defeat his agenda, as it defeated
comparable measures by previous presidents,
not so much in Parliament as through strikes
and demonstrations.

In addition to the immigration problem
and the economy problem, France has a de-
mocracy problem: “the disjunction between
the ruling elite and the mass of the popula-
tion.” The French “political class” is “highly
entrenched and numerous,” and their “pe-
rennial nature” (their long careers and many
comebacks) leads to a feeling that France is
“run by a self-enclosed elite impervious to re-
jection.” Mutual mistrust exists between the
elites and the people. As an instance of elite
mistrust, Fenby quotes former President
Valéry Giscard d’Estaing (now a member of
the Constitutional Council): “if you tell the
French the truth and propose a remedy, you
are sure to be beaten.”

Fenby thinks that politicians’ repeated
failures to deal successfully with the coun-
ty’s economic weaknesses explain why re-
cent French presidents have seen “their pop-
ularity crumble.” He says this “could only
strengthen their underlying belief that the
French people [are], at heart, regicides who
should be pacified for fear that their attach-
ment to the notion that they [have] the right
to overthrow regimes from below would lead
to a rerun of 1789, 1830, 1848 or 1870.” Re-
cent governments have “coddled” the people
to protect them from the reality that the
world has “become a harsher, more competi-
tive place.” But have they really feared revo-
lutionary violence, or have they just been
fearful of losing elections? Fenby exaggerates
the nearness and relevance of long-ago revo-
lutionary violence.

The policy failures of French poli-
ticians, Fenby thinks, have not only
disillusioned and alienated the public,
but opened it to the temptation of “extrem-
ist illusions.” The National Front’s president,
Marine Le Pen, has strengthened her party
by broadening it, getting it to take positions
on several issues beyond “immigration, law
and order, ‘French first’ employment policies
and protectionist fear of Europe.” As Fenby
sees, she has succeeded to some extent in
de-diabolizing the National Front. In 2013
she predicted “that the movement she headed
would win power within ten years, taking
over from the Socialists and the mainstream
right whom she labelled as yesterday’s men
and women, incapable of addressing the na-
tion’s core concerns.” Her prediction could
still come true, even though in the 2017 ele-
cions the National Front itself began to be
seen as a party of “yesterday’s men and wom-
en.” Its future depends partly on Macron’s
performance.

The long-standing political problems in
contemporary France—unsolved economic
weaknesses, terrorist attacks, unassimilat-
ed immigration, uncertain moral and civic
education, and mutual distrust between the
elites and the people—won’t disappear over-
night. We can but cautiously hope that Presi-
dent Macron’s political shakeup will help the
French take steps towards solving some of
these problems.

Jonathan Fenby finds much to admire in
France and the French, but his view is pretty
bleak. “The French want to see their country
as the bearer of a special mission bequeathed
by their history.” This idea of France as a
model for the rest of the world may not be
very plausible, but it is a handy excuse for
resisting useful changes and foreign influ-
ces. The French are determined “to stick
to an image of the French nation [that has]
been outpaced by the changing world.” Thus
they “have become prisoners of the heritage
of their past.” In Fenby’s France, it is those
who remember the past who are condemned
to repeat it.

John Zvesper is a fellow of the Claremont
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fer of Political Power (The Claremont Institute).

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