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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



The Last Meeting of the Ex-Ministers; after the lithograph by Daumier published in *Le Charivari* shortly after the revolution of 1848

“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.”

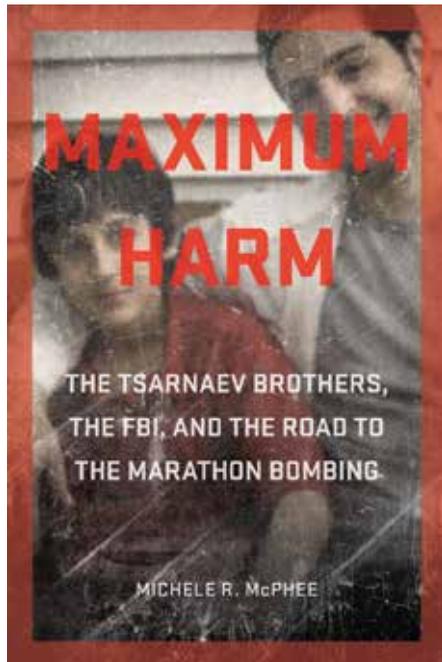
But there is a problem with this formulation. Quite a bit of the Revolution’s legacy is rightly seen as indigestible. The recipe was wrong: too much force and too little reflection and choice; too much Rousseau and not enough Montesquieu. Fenby has to specify that it is only “the ‘good’ elements of the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

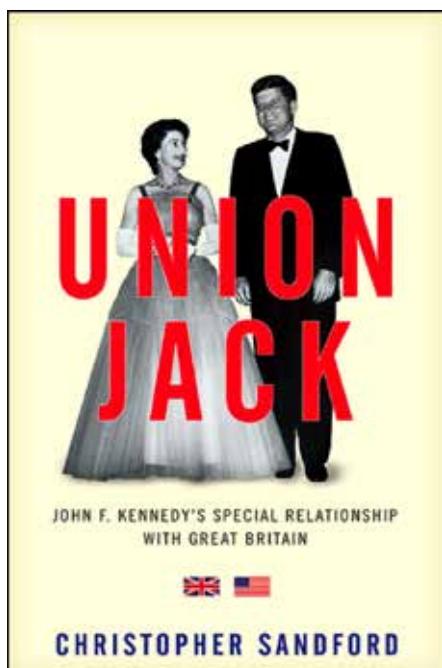
Fenby criticizes the Third Republic for the absence of party discipline among its legislators, who could “form ad hoc coalitions to block bills and look after the interests of their voters and their own careers, toppling ministries at no political cost and reducing most governments to the role of reflecting parlia-

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ment's will rather than implementing executive leadership." But this criticism (which also describes American congressional politics at times) could be presented positively, as a way of governing by compromise—an art he elsewhere says is all too rare in French political culture.

Fenby notes that the Third Republic "airbrushed from the record" episodes of revolutionary violence "such as the [Paris] Commune or the rising of 1848," because it wanted "no place in its lineage for popular rebellion against the state." He cites Ernest Renan's justification: "Forgetting, and I would even say historical error, are an essential factor in the creation of a nation." But however useful such airbrushing might have been in the early years of republican government (and how effective was it, anyway?), today's citizens, as beneficiaries of that experience, are long since capable of preferring ballots over bullets, even if they know that that preference was not always held in the past.

THE THIRD REPUBLIC'S LACK OF PRESIDENTIAL leadership was corrected in the Fifth Republic's 1958 constitution. This constitution was tailor-made for Charles de Gaulle, "the most successful leader France had in the two hundred years covered by this book." Fenby thinks it has worked far less well without de Gaulle, who resigned in 1969. Subsequent presidents—especially the most recently retired ones (Jacques Chirac, Nicolas Sarkozy, and François Hollande)—produced what amounts to an "abdication of leadership at the top."

Will the new president, Emmanuel Macron, be any better? Macron's rise to power has been impressive, and his government has the public's support. However, the French remain very skeptical about their politicians, and they will judge Macron by solid results, without any illusions that he is above partisanship.

Because Fenby believes a strong state will always be an essential feature of French political life, he does not consider that there might be a bright side to the decline in presidential "demeanour," and in the "authority and status" of Fifth Republic presidents (accompanied by the reduction of presidential terms from seven years to five, starting with the 2002 election). Less "monarchical" presidents could mean more accountable ones, and in any case could leave more responsibility in the hands of republican citizens and their elected representatives in the legislature. Even Charles de Gaulle found it useful to descend into the "electoral fray" in the 1965 election, his last.

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 radical Islamic groups." Bombing ISIS bases in the Middle East is relatively "simple," compared to "dealing with the seedbed for terrorism" in France's largely North and West African immigrant population—in 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 keystone 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 united “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 traditional 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 budget deficits, and the political difficulty of establishing 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 democracy 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 “perennial nature” (their long careers and many comebacks) leads to a feeling that France is “run by a self-enclosed elite impervious to rejection.” 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 country’s economic weaknesses explain why recent French presidents have seen “their popularity 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 attachment to the notion that they [have] the right to overthrow regimes from below would lead to a rerun of 1789, 1830, 1848 or 1870.” Recent governments have “coddled” the people to protect them from the reality that the world has “become a harsher, more competitive place.” But have they really feared revolutionary violence, or have they just been fearful of losing elections? Fenby exaggerates the nearness and relevance of long-ago revolutionary violence.

THE POLICY FAILURES OF FRENCH POLITICIANS, Fenby thinks, have not only disillusioned and alienated the public, but opened it to the temptation of “extremist 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 nation’s core concerns.” Her prediction could still come true, even though in the 2017 elections the National Front itself began to be seen as a party of “yesterday’s men and women.” Its future depends partly on Macron’s performance.

The long-standing political problems in contemporary France—unsolved economic weaknesses, terrorist attacks, unassimilated immigration, uncertain moral and civic education, and mutual distrust between the elites and the people—won’t disappear overnight. We can but cautiously hope that President 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 influences. 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 Institute, and the author of Nature and Liberty (Routledge) and From Bullets to Ballots: The Election of 1800 and the First Peaceful Transfer of Political Power (The Claremont Institute).

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