Mitterrand: Marching to a different drummer

By ROBERT D. LEE

—by Bonnie Timmons

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PARIS — France and the United States always seem to be out of step with each other.

Just as power in the United States has passed to a conservative administration, the French have shifted course and elected Francois Mitterrand, a Socialist, to be president of the republic. The Socialist program runs counter to much of what Ronald Reagan stands for.

While President Reagan calls for tax cuts, reduction in the size of the national government and incentives for private investment, Mitterrand advocates an expansion of the welfare state, stimulation of consumer demand to fight unemployment and the nationalization of additional French industries. Where Reagan speaks the language of monetary policy and supply-side economics, Mitterrand sticks unabashedly to Keynesian theory.

The bases of political support could scarcely be more different. President Reagan won election by moving toward the center from the conservative wing of the Republican Party. Mitterrand owes his success to a coalition of electoral forces ranging from the French Communist Party, on his left, to Gaullists disaffected from former President Giscard d'Estaing, on his right. His center of gravity lies well left of center.

How can two countries, subject to the same international climate, battling the same problems of inflation and unemployment, confronting the same questions about quality of life in a growth-oriented world, have moved in such different directions in the space of six months? And what does this apparent divergence mean for ever-delicate Franco-American relations?

The short interval separating the American election of November and the French elections of April 26 and May 10 make it tempting to see the success of Mitterrand as a reaction to the Reagan victory. The French, witnessing the conservative resurgence in Great Britain and in the United States, might be thought to have reacted with characteristic self-conscious independence to avoid any appearance of following an Anglo-Saxon lead.

I SEE nothing to suggest that French voters reasoned that way. In fact, incumbent President Valery Giscard d'Estaing, bearing the stigma of high rates of inflation and unemployment, may have suffered for his refusal to embrace some of the Thatcher and Reagan ideas.

Jacques Chirac, mayor of Paris and head of the major Gaullist Party (RPR), challenged Giscard in the first round on just such a platform and managed to win 18 percent of the vote. Giscard himself, supported by his centrist coalition (UDF), received but 28 percent.

If the Mitterrand victory cannot be understood as a reaction to the conservative resurgence, it can scarcely be interpreted, either, as a ringing endorsement of socialism, much less communism. Nothing indicates that any significant number of voters chose Mitterrand in hopes of moving France toward the East European model.

Rather, the outcome of the election reflects a failure of the former president to sustain the confidence of the nation. Even his warnings about the risks of setting out on an "adventure" with the Socialists and their communist allies could not deter French voters from saying "no" to another seven-year term for Giscard, 52 to 48 percent.

The reasons were partly economic, although inflation and unemployment figures are about the same here as in the United States. Inflation proved to be Jimmy Carter's undoing, and unemployment may have been Giscard's.

Giscard promised to open up new jobs if elected to a second term, but the strategy may have backfired. Mitterrand naturally asked voters why an incumbent who had not done well the first time deserved another chance. Giscard replied that the energy crisis had sabotaged his efforts.

Yet analysis of first-round voting showed that depressed, industrial regions of France where unemployment rates were highest did not abandon Giscard to the same extent as some rural bastions of conservative strength. Jacques Chirac won heavy support among farmers and small businessmen unhappy with Giscard but distrustful of the left.

Chirac promised "change without risk." Eliminated after the first round, he announced he would personally vote for the incumbent president whom he had so severely criticized during the campaign. But he refrained from urging his followers to do likewise, and in fact as many as a third of Chirac's first-round supporters apparently cast blank ballots or voted for Francois Mitterrand in the runoff.

Giscard's high-handed, autocratic, inconsistent behavior in office had alienated Chirac and other Gaullists, as had his maladroit, if not dishonest, handling of several questions of propriety and morality. For example, Giscard's reluctance to account for diamonds given him by the former "emperor" of the Central African Republic, Jean Bokassa, tarnished his image.

GISCARD had himself won the presidency in 1974, after the death of President Georges Pompidou, on a promise to bring change and reform after 16 years of Gaullist rule — under Charles de Gaulle himself, from 1958 until 1969 and then under Pompidou. Although Giscard's own political party was small, he constructed a presidential majority that included centrists as well as Gaullists.

The promise of change and reform, fulfilled in some domains, faded into a commitment to protect what had been achieved. Giscard never tired of pointing out during the recent campaign that France enjoys one of the highest growth rates in Europe, an ever-increasing standard of living, a level of affluence for the average French family that was scarcely imagined 20 years ago.

Telephones now work in fact as well as theory, home washing machines are common, color television is becoming the norm and automobiles are within the reach of everyone. To a foreigner who has lived in France in the early '60s, the early '70s and now the early '80s, the improvements seem significant.

Yet inflation and unemployment have eroded the gains French families have come to expect. With the growth rate diminishing and unemployment rising, voters turned to the opposition, apparently in hopes of satisfying their ever-rising expectations.

Like Jimmy Carter, Valery Giscard d'Estaing prepared his own demise by promising more than he could deliver. Like Carter, he tried to stave off defeat by suggesting that his opponent represented an extremist position that would lead his country to ruin. Both the French and American electorates rejected such warnings and opted for a departure from the prevailing wisdom.

Both Reagan and Mitterrand, although they represent opposite ends of the spectrum, needed to reassure voters that they did not favor radical solutions. Reagan did that with a chuckle during his televised debate with Jimmy Carter. Mitterrand tried to portray himself as quiet, controlled, calm. He let Giscard take the role of aggressor in their televised debate.

Mitterrand also profited in this regard from what some predicted would be his undoing: the breakup of the alliance the Socialists and communists had maintained from 1972 to 1977.

In the last presidential elections in 1974, the two major parties of the left had committed themselves to a common program and a single candidate (Mitterrand) before the first round of balloting. This year the communists ran their own chairman, Georges Marchais, in the first round in an effort to protect their share of the political market against the Socialists.

The bid failed. Marchais drew only 15 percent compared with 26 percent for Mitterrand and with a normal communist share of 20 percent or more. The result confirmed Socialist domination of the left.

VOTERS worried about the sincerity of communist commitment to democratic procedure and the independence of the French communists from Soviet influence presumably found the Socialist victory reassuring.

Giscard's claim that Mitterrand would be hostage to the communists did not ring true this time. That fact made it possible for those upset by economic conditions or Giscard's conduct of the presidency to vote for Mitterrand in the second round.

Because voters seem to have been reacting so negatively to Giscard, it would be difficult to argue that the Mitterrand victory constitutes a mandate for sweeping socialist reforms. The parliamentary elections now scheduled for June will indicate whether French voters intended to authorize fundamental changes in their society or, simply, to change presidents.

Only if Socialists, communists and their allies of the left succeed in capturing a majority of the seats in the National Assembly will Mitterrand be free to proceed with implementation of his program. In that case, France and the United States will seemingly be headed different ways.

Strangely enough, however, even this divergence may be more apparent than real. For even if the left now carries out some or all of its program, the reforms may actually nudge France closer in key respects to the patterns of American politics and society.

For example, the successful pursuit of new policies would show that France, like the United States, could alter its political heading without changing regimes. As long as the Fifth Republic remained in the hands of its founders, the Gaullists and their allies, a cloud of suspicion lingered over its institutions. Political debate often confused opposition to government policy with opposition to the constitution itself.

If the winners now manage to treat the losers as loyal opponents, the pattern of political dialogue in France will probably approach that of the United States or Great Britain.

Moreover, implementation of the Socialist program might reduce somewhat the inequalities that distinguish French society from that of the United States and most other Western democracies. Even a slight redistribution of wealth and income could further temper the ideological quality of French debate. Perhaps one day it will be possible for political opponents to shake hands without fear of compromising themselves in the eyes of their followers.

OF COURSE, at the level of explicit policy, the objectives of the Reagan administration and those of the new French president seem contradictory. But the difference in choice of means should not obscure the common objective: renewed economic growth.

It is only with higher rates of growth that either set of goals can be achieved: lower taxes and balanced budgets, in the American case; higher minimum wages, a 35-hour work week and improved social programs, in the French case.

Both Reagan and Mitterrand defy the limits-to-growth arguments of recent years. Neither believes the climate for expansion has been substantially altered by the energy crisis or by ecological dilemmas.

The convergence of objectives extends to foreign policy. For example, Mitterrand promises closer attention to Israel's problems, as does Reagan. And Mitterrand shares some of Reagan's desire for a harder line toward the Soviet Union. During the campaign Mitterrand accused Giscard of pandering to the Soviet Union in the wake of the invasion of Afghanistan.

Mitterrand has long been more sympathetic to the United States and to the Atlantic alliance than were Charles de Gaulle, Georges Pompidou and Valery Giscard d'Estaing.

But the principles of Gaullist foreign policy — independence within the Western alliance, friendship toward the Third World, maintenance of an independent nuclear capability — were not an issue in the campaign. Mitterrand merely called into question Giscard's interpretation and implementation of those principles.

Any hopes, then, that a docile France will now fall into line behind American leadership would be misplaced. But fears that the Mitterrand presidency somehow jeopardizes Franco-American relations would be even less founded.

The two countries have broken decisively with the status quo to seek a way out of complicated economic problems. Both countries have opted for solutions more radical than any deemed acceptable only a few years ago. Both have done so within the context of democratic politics. Both leaders promise to restore and enhance democracy, by reducing the weight of national government, in one case, and by redistributing wealth and income, in the other.

It would seem a classic test for liberal versus socialist remedies. But it may well be that Reagan and Mitterrand, however much they appear to be marching to different tunes, may succeed or fail together.

Their fate may depend not on the logic or practicality of their proposals but on the state of international relations, the availability of energy at reasonable prices, and the ecological condition of the planet.

If these factors prove favorable, both Mitterrand and Reagan may be applauded as heroes, and both socialists and conservatives may claim victory. And if conditions turn as nasty as pessimistic forecasters believe they may, then these elections in France and America may go down in history as desperate last grasps for the world of growth that could not be restored.

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