

Charles de Gaulle, Emmanuel Macron, and Donald Trump

by Michael Curtis



The meetings of the largest advanced economies in the world indicate that love is now the star dust of yesterday, the music of the years gone by. They rarely produce solutions for the complex problems they encounter, nor end with a fully comprehensive statement. There are few optimistic expectations about the outcome of the meeting in Biarritz, the French seaside resort, starting on August 24, 2019 of the G7, the world's largest advanced economies representing about half of the global GDP based on nominal values. The G7 had begun in response to the oil crisis of the 1970s but has evolved to embrace a larger agenda.

The 2019 meeting has a potential formidable agenda: among it are issues such as differences on Iran, the drift to

protectionism. the trade war with China, lower trade barriers, digital service tax, the decline in world economic growth, climate change and greenhouse gas emissions, global tax policy, multilateral cooperation, terrorism, and Brexit, and unexpectedly the environmental threat in Brazil. The host French President Emmanuel Macron has already said, "We're facing a historic challenge to the world order."

Many of the participants at the G7 will have arrived in France at the Charles de Gaulle (Roissy) airport. By a curious coincidence it is exactly 75 years since Charles de Gaulle, then General, entered Paris during World War II, and walked down the Champs-Elysees, from the Arc de Triomphe to Notre Dame Cathedral to the acclaim of thousands of French people, many singing the Marseillaise. It is intriguing to compare his political policies with those of the present President Macron.

Charles de Gaulle in his extraordinary career was founder of the Free French movement initiated on June 18, 1940 ,with a speech in London on the BBC, leading to a coalition of resistance forces, with de Gaulle as the leader, chair of the Provisional Government of the French Republic, 1944-46, the interim government of France, founder of the Fifth Republic in 1959, and president of France, January 1959 to April 1969.

For a number of years de Gaulle was the dominant figure in French politics. Not surprisingly he has been compared in importance with Napoleon. Both were successful in persuading the population that they personally embodied the nation, but the important difference is clear. Napoleon, the Emperor, sought a Europe under French domination; the soldier turned politician de Gaulle sought a free France in a free Europe, especially one not dominated by the United States or its ally Britain.

From the start, de Gaulle spoke of independence from the "Anglo-Saxons," the U.S. and UK. He was caustic on the issue. The Anglo-Saxons, he said "never really treated us as real

allies...they sought to use the French forces for their own goals. I considered I had to play the French game since the others were playing theirs. I deliberately adopted a stiffened and hardened attitude." Winston Churchill understood this, in spite of the frequent adversarial relationship between them. Churchill said he felt it was essential to de Gaulle's position before the French people that he should maintain a proud and haughty demeanor toward "perfidious Albion."

President Franklin Roosevelt was equally troubled by de Gaulle's attitude and personality and refused to recognize him as the true representative of France. He preferred General Henri Giraud as leader of the resistance until forced by events to recognize de Gaulle in late 1944.

The witty French writer Jules Renard once pointed out that political ideas resemble panes of glass. Looked at one by one they are clear, but put together they become obscure. This may be true of many politicians, including some in the U.S., but it is overwhelmingly true of de Gaulle. He was brave, a man of personal integrity, cold, vain, egotistical, authoritarian, theatrical, anti-Nazi and anti-Fascist, anti-colonial, myth maker, a lover of France if not of French people or parliamentary democracy.

He believed in a policy of grandeur for his country: "All my life I have had a certain idea of France." It was one of French national independence, and power, not reliance on the U.S. for defense. He withdrew from the NATO military integrated command, vetoed UK membership in the EEC, forerunner of the EU, encouraged Quebec separatism. Yet he was a contradiction, a nationalist but also champion of Europe.

He was the exemplification of personal courage, walking down the center aisle of Notre Dame Cathedral immediately when he returned to Paris in spite of firing to kill him. He joined the fight against the 58 Nazi divisions still in Western Europe including 10 Panzer divisions. He was also a difficult

man, unwilling to bend. He knew the importance of myth: there can be no prestige without mystery for familiarity breeds contempt.

The earliest example of this was his statement on August 25, 1944 after he had entered Paris through the city gate of the Porte d'Orleans, declaring, without any credit for U.S. forces, that Paris had liberated itself, liberated by its people with the assistance of the enemies of France, with the support and assistance of the whole of France.

De Gaulle remains a great figure, remembered by over 3,000 roads in France named after him, the Paris airport, and street around the Arc de Triomphe.

Emmanuel Macron has been seen by some as the modern image of de Gaulle. Macron symbolically continues the Gaullist view of France as a strong power, a country for greatness. He has said that France needs a leader, a strong executive president directly elected by the people. Like de Gaulle, he created a political, parliamentary party to support him. Like de Gaulle Macron is a cultured individual, well read, familiar with Hegel, Corneille, and Henri Bergson. Like de Gaulle, he is an activist as well as remembering that the flame of the gallant French Resistance must not be extinguishable. Macron showed this on August 23, 2019 when French Security forces closed the city of Biarritz , where G7 is being held, using 13,000 officers to prevent violence from the yellow vests protestors, and the "black bloc" anti-capitalist protestors who use black clothing or masks to conceal their identity, closing the train station and airport, and not allowing anyone on the central beach, in order to present the image of a strong united France.

Yet they differ temperamentally as well as in policy positions. British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan who himself had an unhappy life, saw that de Gaulle belonged to "the race of unhappy and tortured souls to whom life will never be a

pleasure to be enjoyed but an arid desert.” Macron appears more optimistic and more open to the joy of life, as well as being less frugal than his predecessor.

Yet, Macron, the youngest head of state since Napoleon, believes in a strong presidency, a strong France, and a more integrated Europe. He has taken immediate stands, and accepts the behavior of President Donald Trump with realistic understanding of the differences between them, especially on Trump’s political use of tariffs, on France’s tax on U.S. companies, or on proposals to protect the Amazon rain forest. He has attempted to dilute the influence of Trump by inviting leaders of other countries, African nations, India, Spain, Australia, and Chile, to Biarritz. Macron, opposed the proposal of Trump to readmit Russia which was expelled from G7 in 2014 over its annexation of Crimea. But he has also clashed with other G7 members, especially with Angela Merkel over the environment in Brazil, and with Boris Johnson over Brexit. Irrespective of Trump, there are sharp differences among the G7.

Macron, who was the guest of honor at the only state dinner at the White House under Trump has been careful in relations with the President. Treating him to the Bastille Day military parade in 2017 and to dinner at the Eiffel Tower gave Trump pleasure. On August 24, 2019 he hosted Trump at an unscheduled lunch at the Hotel du Palais in Biarritz, ahead of the official opening of the G7 meeting. As a result, Trump told Macron “I think I could say that we have a “special relationship,” and we have been friends for a longtime.”

Macron explained his attitude to Trump. It’s very simple with President Trump. If he has made a campaign promise, you won’t change his mind. I respect and understand that. ...it is important to say things without compromise, and to try to take up the point we agree on and not give in on the things we disagree on. Macron stated we must find new ways to launch real stimulus and growth, but in view of the divisions among

the G7 the meeting is unlikely to produce any kind of unity or consensus, or to issue a final communique on which the parties agree.