

MACMILLAN-DE GAULLE, 1943-61 – Peter Mangold, St. Antony's College, Oxford.

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Thank you, Anne. It's a special privilege to be invited to speak about Harold Macmillan at Oxford, the University from which, as he later put it, he was "sent down by the Kaiser" in the summer of 1914, and to which he returned as Chancellor and Prime Minister in 1960.

I'd like to talk this evening about one of the most important, and probably the most interesting political friendships – the term should be used in quotation marks – in Harold Macmillan's career. Charles de Gaulle and Harold Macmillan were contemporaries, born in the last decade of C19, who had a good deal in common. Both fought with distinction in the 1st World War, and though one became a professional soldier, the other a publisher and politician, each established a reputation as a rebel; Macmillan as a social radical and strong critic of Appeasement, de G as a leading advocate of mechanisation in the highly conservative French army. The turning point in both men's career came in the Spring 1940. Macmillan first achieved government office in the Administration formed by Churchill in May, while de Gaulle became French under-secretary of war three weeks later..

Both men were widely read, and were moved by the great drama of historical events. Each looked ahead, de Gaulle far into the future. Both were highly skilled political communicators. But there were also important differences, perhaps best summarised by the titles of two of their books of the 1930s – Macmillan's The Middle Way, de Gaulle's The Edge of the Sword. The parliamentarian who frequented the London clubs stands in marked contrast to the French General who consciously cultivated a sense of mystery and aloofness. De Gaulle sought instinctively to impose his will on events; Macmillan was essentially a man of manoeuvre, who operated indirectly, often by stealth. There was a human warmth to the MP who was genuinely moved by the suffering he saw in his Stockton constituency in 1920s, which, save on very rare occasions, seems quite absent in de Gaulle.

Although the two men first met during the war in London, where de Gaulle had set up his headquarters, in June 1940, the Macmillan-de Gaulle story really begins in 1943 in North Africa. In the first joint Anglo-American operation of the war. British and American forces, under Eisenhower had landed in Morocco and Algeria the previous November. Contrary to American hopes, the landings had met with resistance from Vichy troops, and to the infuriation of the British, Eisenhower had come to an agreement with the former Vichy Prime Minister, Admiral Darlan. Determined to establish their political influence at Allied Forces HQ in Algiers, the Foreign Office proposed the appointment of a Resident British Minister. The man chosen, in part at least because of his American mother, was HM.

For Macmillan, this was an opportunity to be grasped with both hands. He was 49. He had spent 16 years on the backbenches, and his period in government had been in relatively obscure junior positions. Here, suddenly, was the prospect of taking part in the high politics of the war; indeed when Darlan was assassinated on Christmas Eve of 1942, Macmillan must have been one of the few people in England to have felt disappointment. He need not have worried. The appointment stood.

Despite Darlan's disappearance from the political scene, the task facing the new Resident Minister, who arrived in Algiers on January 2nd. was daunting. His immediate problem was to defuse the growing sense of Anglo-American rivalry which had developed over the previous few weeks. This he very successfully did, cultivating Eisenhower's Chief of Staff, General Bedell Smith, and his American opposite number, Robert Murphy, who had a reputation in the Foreign Office as being pro-Vichy and an Anglophobe. His strategy was to give the Americans the impression that they were running the show, while doing it himself. This was when he first spoke of the British as Greeks in the America's Roman empire.

Establishing influence over the Americans was important if he was to gain their support for the Foreign Office's immediate objective of working towards a fusion of the two rival groups contending for the French leadership - the one around de Gaulle, the other around the American-supported General Henri

Giraud. It was not easy. De G was a man who polarised opinion, and Roosevelt had taken a visceral dislike to him, which was shared by Murphy. The Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, had described the Free French as polecats. But it was less difficult than mediating the **French** power struggle already under way in Algiers between Giraud and de Gaulle's supporters, a rivalry which was both ideological and personal. Giraud was 5 star general – de Gaulle had only two stars. Both were prickly, had a strong sense of their own dignity, speaking of themselves in the third person. But the stakes were high; Macmillan was not the only one to warn of a French civil war if agreement could not be reached.

Macmillan had one additional task which was not in the job description. By 1943 Churchill had developed a vehement personal animus against de Gaulle, Macmillan was to find that a good deal of his time was spent protecting de G, whom he had immediately identified as by far the most able of the two French rivals, against the combined hostility of Prime Minister and President. "What a lot of faces I find myself saving", he at one point noted in his diary, "and not French faces only, by any means."

HM liked to say in Algiers, that he was not a diplomat. In reality, and in marked contrast to de Gaulle's angry awkwardness, Macmillan was to demonstrate remarkable diplomatic ability, albeit sometimes of a quite unconventional nature. A subtle, clear-headed pragmatist, he knew what he wanted and refused to be deflected from his goal. His judgements were perceptive, and he showed sensitivity to the acute sense of shame felt by the Free French for their defeat. He knew when to intervene and when to leave alone. He had no qualms about taking independent action, or telling Churchill when he was in the wrong. He was good at enlisting the help of French allies, notably Jean Monnet. And he brought to Algiers a sense of humour and of the ridiculous–lubricants normally absent from Entente diplomacy.

The climax of Macmillan's French diplomacy, came in June, with the formation of the French Committee of National Liberation, with de Gaulle and Giraud as co-chairmen. The first meeting between the two generals was stormy, and Macmillan, along with Murphy then began a round of meetings to defuse the crisis. In one of these Macmillan made a personal appeal to de Gaulle, drawing on his own war record in France, saying that he thought their

views on social matters were similar and sympathising with de Gaulle's impatience with old men and old minds. It was an impressive harangue.

The Committee was duly formed, but within a week de Gaulle had resigned. Macmillan now had to stop Giraud grasping the opportunity of ridding himself of his troublesome young rival, urge patience on de Gaulle, something which was never easy, and then cope with angry interventions by Roosevelt and Churchill in support of Giraud. It is against this background, that we come to one of the more unlikely scenes in modern diplomatic history. After an official reception on 14 June, Macmillan and de Gaulle went for a private talk, at the little Roman port of Tipasa, some 40 miles west of Algiers. Here they went swimming – or at least Macmillan went swimming, naked, as was the fashion among British troops in North Africa, while de Gaulle sat in a dignified manner on a rock with his military cap, uniform and belt. Afterwards, like the walrus and the carpenter, they talked of many things, religion, philosophy, ancient and modern history, as well of course about the immediate situation. Macmillan's aim, as he subsequently recorded, was to discuss the options calmly and objectively with de Gaulle, hoping that

“he would play the game and accept any reasonable formula. But I did not try and overpersuade him, because I thought it would probably have the opposite effect, and I wanted him to face the realities. He is a little apt to talk rather wildly in order to make an effect, and it is not wise to indulge him in this.”

For anybody who would like to follow this story in detail, Macmillan's War Diaries provide a sharp and amusing account. But for our immediate purposes, the key point is that Macmillan, working with the Americans, as well as French personalities, had played a central role in helping to mediate one of the most important political agreements in twentieth century French history. In the process he had helped provide de Gaulle with the platform from which he was able to form a provisional government in France after the liberation of 1944, and after elections, become Prime Minister. With the exception of Eden, it is difficult to think of any other British politician who has been so closely and constructively involved in French internal affairs. This was not, perhaps, always an advantage, as he himself admitted to Eden in August, when he

suggested that there would always be “some of the awkwardness one has towards a chap, whom **one** has nursed through an attack of DT.” But his role was certainly recognised by a number of key French figures, indeed according to the former Free French spokesman, Maurice Schumann, speaking in 1950, Macmillan had done “more for France than any man, including Churchill.” That does not however appear to have been a view shared by de Gaulle, whose War Memoirs strike a note of reserve about Macmillan. Perhaps he had spent too much time working with the Americans for de Gaulle’s tastes; perhaps too, Macmillan, while sympathetic, lacked the overtly Francophile sentiments de Gaulle valued in Churchill, Eden or Duff Cooper.

Macmillan left Algiers in January 1944, his reputation greatly enhanced. He ended the war as “Viceroy of the Mediterranean”, went home for a brief spell as Minister of Aviation, before losing his seat in the 1945 election. The Conservatives’ return to power in 1951 marks the beginning of his final ascent to the top of the greasy pole - Minister of Housing, Minister of Defence, and then Foreign Secretary and Chancellor. Suez brought him the premiership in January 1957. Eighteen months later, events in Algeria, where France was fighting a bitter colonial war, brought Charles de Gaulle, back as French Prime Minister. From one point of view this was welcome news in London. De Gaulle’s return promised stability in France. But it was also opened the prospect for a whole series of new foreign policy problems.

The two men were quick to recall their wartime association, and their correspondence, which now began, has a notable informality, also evident in their meetings. These mostly took the form of relaxed country-house weekends, one to one discussions without interpreters. But the ease was apparent rather than real. Macmillan was much keener to meet than was the General, who showed a marked reluctance to come to Britain. This owed less to Macmillan’s reference to the General’s dual role as Head of State and Government, than to the General’s very mixed memories of his wartime stay in Britain. He only returned “in majesty”, as the French ambassador, Jean Chauvel put it, for a State Visit in 1960, to which he had not been looking forward. But Britain was not the General’s priority. The with whom he now wanted to establish a rapport with, was not his old wartime companion, but the West German Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer. Nothing was ever agreed

when de Gaulle and Macmillan met. On the contrary, for much of they seemed either to be fencing, talking past each other, or engaging in generalities.

On the key issues of the day, Macmillan and de Gaulle had often very different ideas. Macmillan was an alliance man; de Gaulle, in the words of the Paris embassy, was an “almost impossible ally.” (the emphasis is on the ALMOST- de Gaulle’s great skill was in knowing exactly how much he could get away with.) Macmillan believed in a rather ill-defined concept of “interdependence.” De Gaulle with his memories of France’s wartime fate, was preoccupied with **independence**. While for Macmillan Europe was the problem and the “special relationship” with Washington the solution, de Gaulle’s strategy was geared towards Europe, with the US firmly cast as the villain of the piece. And with de Gaulle in power in Paris, France and Britain were again rivals, jostling for position at the top of the second international league.

These differences came to a head over the British bid to join the EEC. The Eden government, with Macmillan as Foreign Secretary, had decided to stay out of the 1955 Messina discussions which led the signature of the Treaty of Rome in March 1957. Britain’s initial answer had been a European free trade area including the EEC and other European states covering all goods except for food. The question had arisen at Macmillan and de Gaulle’s first meeting in June 1958, when the General had mistakenly believed that Macmillan was offering British help for the French nuclear programme in return for French cooperation over Europe. In the event the French said no. As Britain’s international position continued to weaken, and with the of the prospect of the EEC taking on a political dimension, and threatening to usurp London as Washington’s ally of first choice, the Cabinet finally decided in the summer of 1961, to seek British membership of the EEC. It was one of the most important initiatives of Macmillan’s premiership.

The key to a potentially extremely difficult set of negotiations, was the attitude of the man whom Macmillan had helped eighteen years earlier in Algiers. While the evidence from Paris was contradictory – the French were to prove themselves masters of equivocation – the prevailing impression was that de

Gaulle was hostile to the British bid. When the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Norman Brook, wrote to Macmillan that it would be necessary to reach some agreement with de Gaulle as to the object of the negotiations before the actual final decision to apply for entry was taken, the PM had responded, "This will have to be done, but HOW I am not sure." In the event no such prior agreement was reached, nor was any serious analysis done of how great a threat de Gaulle posed, or how it might be countered. Reginald Maudling's view – and Maudling had been in charge of the Free Trade negotiations, that the whole attempt was futile, was ignored.

Formal negotiations between Britain and the Six were opened in Brussels in October 1961, with the British delegation led by Sir Pierson Dixon, a former member of Macmillan's staff in Algiers, and now ambassador in Paris. It was soon clear that the French were dragging their feet, and that the issue would have to be decided at the highest level. Macmillan now faced the dilemma which he had hitherto not addressed. He was the *demandeur*, a negotiating position de Gaulle was always careful to avoid, and he held a very weak hand. He could either try to persuade de Gaulle of the advantages of British membership, or offer him a variant on the nuclear weapons deal, which de Gaulle had wrongly believed had been on the table in June 1958.

Viewed from the Elysee palace, the British bid was thoroughly unwelcome. It posed both economic, particularly agricultural, and foreign policy problems for France. The General looked to the establishment of a French-led Europe as an independent third Power, manoeuvring between the superpowers. Britain was a threat on two counts – as a rival for European leadership and as a potential American Trojan horse in the General's projected European citadel. Britain, as Churchill had repeatedly made clear to him in the war, looked towards the open sea rather than Europe. What reason was there now to trust her newly-proclaimed European vocation? And then there was what he sometimes referred to as the Cortège of British satellites, the Danes, Irish and Norwegians, not to mention the Commonwealth, who threatened to reopen difficult issues

which had been resolved between the Six. British membership, as he once put it, “would change everything.”

On the other hand, the General, who understood that a strong defence identity was vital for his European project, needed British, above all British nuclear cooperation, something he could not, and would not, get from the West Germany. Like France, Britain thought globally, and was hostile to ideas of supranationalism. Moreover the General had a respect for Britain as a “serious” Power, which he did not share for any of his EEC partners – two ex-enemies, and three small states. (The General was a power snob.) A deal might seem an outside prospect, but it was **not** beyond the range of possibility.

There were only three Macmillan-de Gaulle meetings which dealt with the EEC question. The first took place at Macmillan’s private home in Sussex, Birch Grove, in November 1961. Here Macmillan tried persuasion, and got nowhere. The Quai d’Orsay brief for the General had advised him to keep Macmillan guessing as to France’s intentions. If Macmillan got the impression France was favourable, its negotiating position in Brussels would be weakened; if he came to the conclusion that France was hostile to the bid, France would have trouble with its EEC partners and the US. The General seems to have stuck admirably to this brief. Afterwards Macmillan vented his frustration in his diary, complaining that the “emperor of France’s” pride, inherited hatred of England, bitter memories of the war, and above all his vanity for France

“make him half welcome, half repel us with a strange ‘love-hate’ complex. Sometimes, when I am with him, I feel I have overcome it. But he goes back to his distrust and his dislike, like a dog to his vomit.”

The second of the de Gaulle-Macmillan meetings took place in June 1962, this time in France at Chateau de Champs, near Paris. Here Macmillan sought to persuade the General over some of the issues creating difficulties at the Brussels talks, notably agriculture and the Commonwealth – de Gaulle quotes him as saying “The England of Kipling is dead.” More important, Macmillan

sought to dangle a nuclear carrot in front of the General. He had to do so with considerable circumspection, since British nuclear technology was increasingly closely integrated with that of the US, and the Americans had made it clear that they did not want the General appeased with their secrets. But the hint, when Macmillan spoke on European defence, a subject he had not raised at Birch Grove was clear. This was the closest de Gaulle came to being convinced. A French diplomat who saw the General a few weeks later, noted a change in de Gaulle's thinking. He no longer seemed to rule out the prospect of British entry entirely, though he continued to deplore it.

Over the summer and autumn, the political fortunes of the two men diverged. Macmillan's administration was losing altitude, while de Gaulle was approaching the high point of his presidency. The General was by now confident of German support should he provoke a crisis by vetoing Britain's EEC bid—Adenauer had not forgiven Macmillan for his lukewarm support over the Berlin crisis. And a massive yes vote in a French referendum in favour of direct elections to the presidency, gave de Gaulle carte blanche for both his international as much as his domestic policies.

An entry in Macmillan's diary for the 1st December, refers to the French opposing the British "by every means, fair and foul" and terrifying their EEC partners by "their intellectual superiority, and spiritual arrogance, and shameful disregard for truth and honour." But in his final, and emotional meeting with de Gaulle at Rambouillet a few days later, Macmillan made no new nuclear offer, and de Gaulle for the first time revealed his hand, making clear his opposition to the British bid. At a French Cabinet meeting de Gaulle remarked that he preferred that he Macmillan's Britain to that of Labour, and would like to help him remain in power. "But what could I do accept sing to him Edith Piaf's song, "Ne pleurez pas, milord." This *bon mot* was leaked to the French press.

Immediately after his grim Rambouillet visit, Macmillan flew to Nassau, to try to persuade Kennedy to provide Britain with Polaris in place of the technically flawed Skybolt missile, which the Americans had decided to cancel. The Prime

Minister, whose government seemed threatened by the missile crisis, put on a bravura performance, and got what he wanted. At the same time, Kennedy made a similar nuclear offers to France, and here, Macmillan saw a final chance of rescuing his EEC bid. France lacked warheads for Polaris; might not there be the opening for a deal? It was wishful thinking. Kennedy's had been conditional on the submarine-launched missile being part of a multilateral force, a concept which was anathema to the General. Moreover, by agreeing to the Polaris deal rather than seeking a European, ie an Anglo-French, nuclear alternative, de Gaulle believed that Macmillan had shown his true Atlanticist colours. " Mr.Macmillan has let me down," he told his ambassador in London, "and you can tell him that." These, I think were genuine sentiments, not simply an excuse for the forthcoming veto. On 14th January 1963, in a superbly stage-managed press conference, de Gaulle announced that he was opposing the British bid. Coming shortly after Acheson's famous remark about Britain having lost an empire and failed to find a role, this was deeply unfriendly act, which suggests not just an assertion of French interests, but a settling of Anglo-French scores.

One of the first biographies of Macmillan was subtitled "A Study in Ambiguity", and this applies very well to the EEC bid. Important as it was, Macmillan never showed the same persistence and passion with which he had pressed his earlier campaign for an East-West summit or for the partial test ban treaty which was signed in 1963. This may have reflected his ambiguous attitude towards the EEC, as well as his very limited scope for manoeuvre between the Commonwealth, the Conservative Party, the Americans and de Gaulle. His approach to the latter, was I believe, based on hope rather than expectation. That hope was bolstered by his success, under very different conditions, of dealing with the General in Algiers, and his inability, again based on the Algiers experience, to bring himself to believe that he himself would become victim to the brutality of which he knew the General to be capable. Kennedy at Nassau had responded to an appeal from an old friend; de Gaulle, however, did not believe that statesmen had friends. Macmillan knew this, and yet did not draw full conclusions from the fact.

Nor did Macmillan fully register the intensity of the emotional drives behind de Gaulle's foreign policy. The Prime Minister got much of the picture. He had a good feel for the General's Great Power and European ambitions, his sense of historic Anglo-French rivalry and continuing resentment about his treatment by the Anglo-Saxons during the war. But a British Prime Minister who got on so well in Washington, found it difficult to grasp the obsessive quality which de Gaulle's post-war suspicions of the Americans took, and therefore the extent to which Macmillan himself was compromised by the "special relationship." And believing, as he quite rightly did, that "independence" was an anachronism in the post-war world, Macmillan never fully understood how far it coloured the General's ideas about the French *Force de Frappe* and his dreams about an "independent" Europe.

One official describes the veto as , "a political, psychological and physical blow" from which the Prime Minister never fully recovered. It also deprived him of what would have been the major tangible achievement of his premiership. Britain, in the words of the US State Department in 1962, was engaged in "adjustments of great complexity" concerned with the shift "from major to lesser power status and its move towards the Continent." Macmillan had skilfully managed part of this process; the General ensured that the move towards the Continent eluded him.

A few days after Macmillan's illness and resignation in October 1963, there was a diplomatic shoot at Rambouillet. De Gaulle made a point of telling Sir Pierson Dixon that despite all that had happened , his feelings for Macmillan remained unchanged. "I wish you to believe this," he told the ambassador. "What I say is meant in all sincerity. I wish Mr Macmillan well both today and in the future." Cynical as Dixon by now was about the General's assurances, on this occasion the ambassador was inclined to believe that the sentiments were genuine.

Footnote references in Mangold, *The Almost Impossible Ally* (I B Tauris, 2006.)

