

'France at the crossroads' from Le Monde (22 January 1946)

Caption: On 22 January 1946, the French daily newspaper Le Monde comments on General de Gaulle's resignation from the post of President of the Provisional Government two days earlier.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. Beuve-Méry, Hubert. 22.01.1946, n° 342. Paris: Le Monde. "La France au carrefour", p. 1.

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France at the crossroads

At a specially convened meeting at his rue Saint-Dominique headquarters, General de Gaulle announced yesterday to his Cabinet that he could no longer assume control of the Government. This decision, which General de Gaulle seems to have taken after careful and objective consideration, has generated more sadness and apprehension in the country than true surprise. The French people were aware that, among the three large parties in the majority government, a struggle, sometimes overt, sometimes covert, was taking place despite the apparent unity. In trying so hard to be the personal symbol of that unity, Charles de Gaulle was attempting a task which, to many, appeared doomed to failure.

Had he been keener on glory and a quiet life, de Gaulle would have announced his retirement the day after the elections to the Constituent Assembly. That very day, in front of the freely elected representatives of the people, opponents and allies who had so often underestimated him, he was able to declare that France had fully recovered its sovereignty at home and abroad and that the rejuvenated empire could already glimpse its future development within the new French Union. France, which had for too long been controlled by others, was now fully in charge of its destiny. The solemn promise of 18 June had been magnificently upheld.

But, by itself, this extraordinary result was still only an incredible series of events. It was not enough to give France back its identity; for the future, it was imperative to ensure and support the quality of life, the taste for freedom and for order, the sense of fraternity and greatness, the work ethic and spirit of public service. No one could play this difficult role better than General de Gaulle, with all his strengths and weaknesses. However, he intended to play the role and undertake the task of reconstructing France using the same ground rules that had enabled him to achieve the Liberation and placing himself above party politics. His retirement will make the outside world fear that, in extraordinarily difficult circumstances, his failure may also be that of France itself.

In other times, the democrats would quite willingly have been able to assume their share of responsibility. The greater the man, the greater the debt owed to him by the country and the greater the risk to the normal operation of the institutions. Happy nations have no history, and the ingratitude that democracies traditionally show to their great men is, perhaps, just a reflex of the political instinct of self-preservation.

The trouble is that nowadays it is no longer really democracy that is at stake, at least not parliamentary democracy. Too often, political parties seem to accept provisionally — and even then uncomfortably — parliamentary rules in order to dispense with them better soon afterwards. The Constitution being drawn up should ensure the rapid and natural triumph of an authoritative and popular democracy leading automatically to rule by one man or group. The vast majority of the French are not yet prepared for this and may not even find it acceptable. During the crisis which accompanied the formation of the Government last November, the Communist Party showed by its attitude that it was not unaware of this situation.

Responsibility for the future now lies clearly with the majority parties, particularly the Communist and Socialist Parties. Through their actions, if not by means of international law, the United States, without whose assistance France has no hope of speedy recovery, and the Soviet Union, whose influence has obviously not diminished since the dissolution of the Comintern, can to a large extent help or hinder the situation. Let France not have to pay too high a price for being at the crossroads of two worlds allied and at the same time at odds with each other on many points.