

Interview with Georges Berthoin: the relationship between de^oGaulle and the United Kingdom (Paris, 22^oJuly 2005)

Source: Interview de Georges Berthoin / GEORGES BERTHOIN, Étienne Deschamps, prise de vue : François Fabert.- Paris: CVCE [Prod.], 22.07.2005. CVCE, Sanem (Luxembourg). - VIDEO (00:05:27, Couleur, Son original).

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Last updated: 05/07/2016

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[Étienne Deschamps] How would you, as someone who was living in London and therefore occupying a ringside seat, describe the way that the British experienced and interpreted the double refusal by de Gaulle? Were they expecting de Gaulle to take this position and how did they react to the general's 'non possumus'?

[Georges Berthoin] Very badly. First of all, British pride was wounded; this is incontrovertible. Yet they were in two minds about de Gaulle because there was real admiration for the man. I recall that when de Gaulle returned to power, there was a State Visit to London and I was in Whitehall on a balcony with friends who were Labour party members of parliament that were against de Gaulle. When de Gaulle arrived, I saw tears in their eyes — because that is an odd thing about the English: every now and then they cry. More than you would think. And the remark that this group made was: 'Here comes the old warrior.' That is something that they are very sensitive to. The British still have the Blitz mentality — and you must have noticed this in the recent bombings. Did you see the recent reactions of the British — and those of yesterday too? There is a tradition in London; they hold onto it and it is not artificial, it goes very deep. It is quite surprising, even among the younger generation that did not live through all that. You heard people referring to the V1s, the V2s and so on. After all, for them, de Gaulle was the one that had been there when Great Britain was on its own, when even the Americans were keeping well out of it, and the Soviets as well. So there was real respect for him. At the same time there was the performance of this man who had returned to power, who was impressive. They did all they could to win him over when he was received in this extraordinary style. But at the same time, he was the symbol of a France that was ambitious, and there was, between these two imperial powers that no longer possessed an empire, or whose empires were disappearing, there was a sort of rivalry between two centres of power that had been very important in the past, that were two very important cultural centres. Which would win? Which would win against the other? Europe was becoming the arena within which this rivalry, this competitiveness, was to be expressed. De Gaulle, of course, had something that they did not; it was something that the British recognised in him, a Churchillian dimension, but Churchill was no longer there. So de Gaulle's refusals, made in pretty tough conditions from the diplomatic point of view, were received very badly.

Yet, at the same time, this did draw attention to a contradiction in the British position: were they to become the number two in their relationship with the American world power — a relationship that they valued — but still number two? The famous special relationship between Great Britain and the United States was not perceived in the same way in London as in Washington. In Washington, London was not particularly important, but in London the relationship was most important. They realised that a whole series of agreements, the Nassau Agreement, Polaris and so on, put Great Britain in a situation of dependence regarding American world strategy and the Americans treated the British quite badly on occasions; they also knew that the Americans were much more interested in European integration than in the famous special relationship, so when de Gaulle said 'no' to them on two occasions, once quite clearly, another time more ambiguously, they said to themselves: 'Well then, where are we? Where do we go from here?' There had been Dean Acheson's famous remark which was always repeated in all the speeches: 'Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role' and they said — and I heard this myself in very private meetings: 'Well then, our role is at the head of Europe, it is to be the leader of Europe.' But the seat had already been taken and de Gaulle did not want the seat to..., that is to say, within the Six, de Gaulle felt that France was the leader for a variety of reasons that were more or less complex. The English conception of Europe was, institutionally speaking, the Europe of de Gaulle, but he would not brook any competition for the leadership. British pride was wounded; the paradox is, because they were given 'no' as an answer, they wanted to join all the more. So, that could be regarded as a victory, presumably.

It should be added that, in the end, when there was the Élysée Agreement between Heath and Pompidou, Heath accepted practically all the terms that Pompidou set. Pompidou, who was not a Gaullist, there is an ambiguity here... — I have used this word a lot, but there is a lot of ambiguity in politics, especially in international politics — Pompidou was not a Gaullist. He was not in the Resistance during the war, but he carried on with his work as a teacher instead, so he was not part of this 'ethos'; he had not been in London, he had not done anything special. He had survived. He had not supported the Vichy regime; he had remained

neutral. So Pompidou might be said to be open-minded where the British were concerned. He was not particularly anglophile, but preceding the meetings with Heath, exhaustive diplomatic and psychological preparations were made on both sides and they got on very well together. They were men of unexceptional origins, men who had achieved success through their own talents and merit, and they were both men who succeeded figures of historic stature. So they said: 'Now that we are in power, we can start on a new page of history, but this time in an atmosphere of mutual understanding.' Meanwhile, one issue, one large obstacle separating the French and British negotiators, was the problem posed by the pound sterling as reserve currency. In the end, the British considered that managing the pound sterling as reserve world currency imposed constraints on British economic and monetary policy that were becoming intolerable. Thus they also wanted to rid themselves of this burden. So they came to an agreement and, having received a 'no' on two occasions, this made up for the door that had been slammed shut, which was regarded as a victory and, at the same time, as reparation.