

The Democrats' French Dilemma

by Conrad Black



An eminent former cabinet member and I are having an amicable running debate about what level of concern is justified by the steadily more extreme espousal of lunatic policy positions by influential Democrats. Personal income top tax rates of 70 percent (Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders), nationalized health care (Kamala Harris), open borders and sanctuaries against federal immigration laws (most audible Democrats), the killing of live new-born children (flirtations by many, apart from the governor of Virginia, who took the initial plunge on his way all the way down last week), and now, a green dictatorship that would radically renovate every building in America, abolish road and air transportation, and require brigades of people to diaper flatulent cows (the inevitable Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey, *inter alia*). My well-travelled friend thinks that as the polls seem to support a good deal of this foolishness, it is very dangerous.

I think it is a [welcome development](#), as in their frustration

that Donald Trump has emerged as a serious challenge and not just an electoral fluke who can be easily purged and disposed of, the Democrats are getting everything off their chest in a mighty primal disgorgement.

Radical political change, even mere hustings-posturing and *salonnier*-bombast, always becomes more and more exaggerated before it snaps back. Genuine revolutionary movements go farther and farther until they reach the law of 22 Prairial—the French Revolution’s “Law of the Great Terror.” The Committee of Public Safety accelerated and expedited executions of the accused, after *pro forma* trials and on the flimsiest denunciations. (Michael Avenatti-level allegations, in other words).

Then, suddenly, Thermidor arrives. The majority soon is composed of people who think they might be next, chaos is at hand, and a little ordinary government starts sounding like a good idea again. The Committee of Public Safety and the chief prosecutor were summarily condemned, mounted the scaffold to great public derision and amusement, and in due course had their heads snipped off like flowers by Dr. Guillotine’s merciful invention. In Hitler’s phrase (in a completely different context), peace breaks out.

In France, the Terror was followed by the crooks and rakes of the Directory, and then theorists of the consulate, and then Napoleon, and finally, 22 years after Louis XVI was beheaded, his brother returned in the baggage train of the Duke of Wellington’s army. The Bourbons, said Talleyrand (who served all the regimes, turning his coat again and again with the precision of a cynical genius), “had forgotten nothing, and they had learned nothing.” And the cycle began again, though slightly less violently.

The United States is not revolutionary France and these explosions of policy idiocy among the Democrats are acts of frustration and dispossession (of a sacred right to govern),

and the level of civil disturbance is much less than it was during the worst of the Civil Rights-era divisions and the Vietnam War protests. The country is becoming very prosperous and is certainly not being defeated or humbled in the world, and no serious person is calling for violence, though Maxine Waters and a few of the other Democratic extremists come close at times, and the president has suggested that some of his hecklers could profit from a punch in the face. But instead of the logical course when a party in a democracy is defeated—regrouping and mapping out a strategy to win the next election—what we have is the Democrats fast-forwarding in a race to be the most outspoken and *avant-garde* on every issue, as they watch their whole policy agenda go up in flames.

A better historical precedent than the French Revolution is the famous *evenements* of May 1968 in France. Charles de Gaulle, a figure of immense prestige and in the same exalted echelon of war-time leadership as Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt, was coming up on the 10th anniversary of his assumption of government in 1958, when he received practically unlimited powers at the request of all parties except the Communists to save the country from civil war.

In May 1968, de Gaulle was on a state visit to Romania, encouraging the government there to throw the Russians out. His very capable prime minister (and respected successor), Georges Pompidou was on a state visit to Afghanistan and Iran. There was a fracas at the Sorbonne, the main university in Paris, and the head of the university closed it down. Other university faculties and students announced they were on strike; there were some demonstrations, and in the manner of these things, it spread. Soon most workers were on strike. Everything ground to a halt. For some reason that has never been seriously explained, the French periodically become bored with their magnificent country with its delicious food and wine and elegance in almost all things and pick up paving stones and throw them at the police and put up barricades on

the great boulevards of Paris and other cities.

De Gaulle and Pompidou came back from their foreign visits, de Gaulle made a speech proposing some reforms to increase participation in decision-making by workers and university students—this had been a hobby horse of his for all of his public career of nearly 30 years—but it elicited no coherent response. Pompidou negotiated with the trade union confederations, though their leaders had not called any of these strikes, but he and de Gaulle wanted to separate the workers from the students, whom everyone could tire of quickly. De Gaulle adopted the policy that there was nothing for it but to wait until the avaricious bourgeois spirit of timeless France returned and then to move decisively.

After 10 days of mounting chaos and complete silence from the highest figures of government, de Gaulle ostentatiously visited the commander of the French army on the Rhine, General Massu, a paratrooper commander and victor of the Battle of Algiers. It was only five years since the end of the war in Algeria and the French army was very large and notoriously heavy-handed at dealing with uncooperative civilians.

De Gaulle returned and addressed the nation for less than five minutes. The state television network was on strike so there was just a photograph of him on the screen but the audio was clear. He was, he said, “the sole legitimate repository of Republican power (and had) considered every means, I repeat, every means for the conservation of that power.” He would complete his popular mandate, had entire confidence in the prime minister, had just dissolved the National Assembly and elections would take place on the timetable provided by the constitution “unless the forces of totalitarian Communism attempt to gag the country and prevent it from voting, by the same means by which they have prevented the students from studying, the teachers from teaching, and the workers from working: intimidation and intoxication, and tyranny.”

In that case (and it was a wild and deliberate abuse of the Red Scare—the Communists had nothing to do with it; it was just the peculiarity of the French), de Gaulle would, implicitly but clearly, use the army to clean up the unrest by whatever means necessary. The entire *dissident* movement collapsed, everyone went back to work and university, and de Gaulle and Pompidou won the greatest electoral victory in 165 years of intermittent French republican history.

The relevance of this to the United States is the pattern of angry people shrieking increasingly mad allegations and tocsins to apparent public approval until it all suddenly collapses. Many of these Democratic Party candidates are going to immolate themselves with this nonsense. Of the candidates visible now, Joe Biden, Michael Bloomberg, Sherrod Brown, and Amy Klobuchar (that is, most of the experienced ones) are the only ones who haven't walked the plank they can't walk back on.

The Democrats will fumble and jostle, listening to Cory Booker liken climate change to the threat of Nazism, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez assure them that universal health care will eliminate the need for funerals. Public opinion will move from bemusement to disparagement of these hare-brained nostrums, and they will be a bedraggled and hungover party that finally chooses its candidates for national office. We're getting some of the entertainment as France did in the spring of 1968, but none of the worrisome or economically disruptive aspects of it. That is doubly good, as Donald Trump, though he is a strong if unorthodox leader, is not Charles de Gaulle.

In the meantime, none of the senior officials of the government of Virginia should resign. Tasteless appearances in university yearbooks 30 and 40 years ago are irrelevant now. The lieutenant governor should take paid leave until the charges against him can be evaluated impartially. No public office will be worth anything or will attract anyone worthwhile, if their elected occupants can be chased out over

student nonsense they may have committed more than a generation ago, or on grave allegations but with no due process at all. If Justin Fairfax is charged with serious offenses after a credibly impartial and thorough investigation, he should resign, but not before that. Governor Northam's offense is his sickeningly bland approval of infanticide, but that is a matter for the voters to address; like everyone, he has the right to express his opinions, no matter how odious they may be.