

Au Revoir to France?

FRANCE ON THE BRINK:
A Great Civilization Faces the New Century.
By Jonathan Fenby. Arcade. 449 pp. \$27.95

by Amy E. Schwartz

Grumbling at France and its unaccountable insistence on remaining French is an indoor sport whose popularity reaches from the humblest spat-upon package tourist to the highest levels of France's fellow NATO governments. Foreign employers rage at the restrictive labor rules and the incredibly high costs of hiring and firing French workers. Business types jeer at the impending 35-hour work week enacted by Lionel Jospin's Socialist government. Diplomats tear their hair over the French government's periodic need to show that its interests are independent of the rest of the world's, whether by testing nuclear weapons, breaking the ranks of a worldwide embargo to enter an oil deal with Iran, or steering executives of non-French companies to allegedly bugged seats in Air France's business class. And individual visitors, no matter how admiring, sooner or later long in private for some crushing answer to the sublime French certainty that no way but the French way can possibly be correct.

Jonathan Fenby maintains that the French way of doing things has brought France's civilization to the brink of disaster. He believes that France—the exceptional, the brilliant, the stylish—is mired in statism and corruption, unable to face its problems. “The French have to confront the implications of a future which lies in an increasingly integrated con-

tinental, bringing with it responsibilities and challenges,” he writes near the end of his book. “For all the pull of rural life and tradition, they have to come to grips with the modern nature of their nation. The state and the politicians have to free themselves from the grasp of lobbies. . . . Public morality has to triumph over corruption. . . . Government has to see itself an enabler of the individual genius of its people. . . . The elite has to become more open to the world and its ideas.”

It seems a tall order for any nation, let alone one that the author has just spent 400 pages denouncing for institutional sclerosis and narrow self-regard. Yet Fenby styles himself a Francophile, and he has the credentials to prove it: a French wife, years of experience covering the country for various British newspapers, and an enthusiastic palate that delights in the nation's endless offerings of food and wine. But he is a Francophile mordantly critical of the object of his affections, particularly what it has become in recent years. He writes, he would have you know, more in sorrow than in anger.

In a clever chapter on “Vanishing Madeleines,” he laments the decay of the world-renowned symbols of French life. “*Foie gras* is imported from Central Europe and snails from as far away as Taiwan. That essential element in traditional French hygiene, the



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bidet, is now installed in fewer than 10 percent of new bathrooms.” Berets? Only three factories in France still make them—a tenth of the number before World War II. Baguettes? “As people grow richer and more urbanized, they eat less bread. A century ago, the average French person consumed 219 kilograms a year. . . . In the 1990s it fell below 60 kilos. Parisians now average only 36 kilos a year.” Cafés? Three thousand close each year, half of them in Paris, as patterns of life change and people do less drinking. In another chapter, he bemoans the vanishing of the country’s rural roots as villages wither and their customs die out: “The annual killing of the pig and the use of every morsel down to the ears and tail for food has been supplanted by preserved cold cuts in cellophane from the local supermarket.”

But here the argument becomes contradictory, even circular—because if anyone shares Fenby’s solicitude for these local customs, these symbolic hallmarks, it is the French government. It pours out subsidies for agriculture, for small-town living, for those who bake baguettes in the traditional manner. It nests daily life in regulations intended to encourage people to patronize small grocers and eat fresh bread. And those regulations and subsidies, in turn, are a large part of what drives Fenby and other critics of French exceptionalism round the bend. His ideal—a modern France, fully integrated with the Continent, no longer in the grip of lobbies and special interests—would be a France losing ever more swiftly the things that mark it off from the rest of the world.

The book has other weaknesses as well. Fenby laments the number of scandals in high places, the lack of turnover in political office, the gap between the well off and a resentful underclass, the strain of integrating racial minorities—but he never compares the French experience with that of other countries. What nation *has* figured out what to do about its underclass? An otherwise gripping chapter on Jean-Marie Le Pen and his National Front ends with the party’s “implosion,” undercutting the author’s argument that the Front’s persistence signals deep trouble in the electorate. A section on

Francophobia is little but a collection of lame jokes and nasty newspaper headlines. Elsewhere, the problem is pure rummage: Fenby loves lists, and he has an odd habit of rattling off a long series of unconnected one-sentence items on a theme, for all the world like someone reciting the results of a Nexis search.

France on the Brink finally hits its stride in the last four chapters, when it settles down to a straightforward narrative account of the last three presidents of the Republic: Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, François Mitterrand, and Jacques Chirac. Here is grist for Fenby’s contention that high-level French politics is ingrown and arid of ideas. He follows the career-long hatred between the Socialist Mitterrand and the neo-Gaullist Chirac—each of whose overriding political goal was to keep the other from power—and tracks Mitterrand’s cynical flip-flopping between left and right. “If one constant ran through Mitterrand’s long career,” he writes, “it was his ability to disown his beliefs of yesterday.” Arriving at the great conundrum of recent French politics—why, in 1997, a faltering Chirac called new elections that lost him his huge parliamentary majority and forced him to appoint socialist Lionel Jospin as prime minister—Fenby offers little in the way of new reporting to clear up the mystery. Plainly, though, he is as suspicious of Jospin’s efforts to invent a French “third way” as he is of previous governments’ temporizing.

France may well be due for another set of rude shocks to its beloved way of life. Surrounded by countries buffeted by similar forces, and committed to that engine of change, the European Union, it has nonetheless held out longer than its neighbors. Its many fans—Fenby indubitably among them—still hope for a miraculous solution, one that lets France retain its distinctiveness without lapsing into insularity. Nothing better demonstrates the continued aura of French aplomb and self-confidence than the faith that France will find this salvation.

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