

President Bling-Bling

WILLIAM W. FINAN JR.

Is it a straightforward political memoir? Is it a candidate's platform and hagiographic autobiography swaddled in a political memoir? Or, as its title implies, is it an attempt to supply evidence as if in a court of law where one stands accused—the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God?

Though *Testimony* indeed describes a political life and a political viewpoint from the perspective of someone who wants to clear his name, the book's tone is not defensive. Rather, the Nicolas Sarkozy who emerges in this volume declares "This is who I am; I can be no one else." Self-serving? To a degree. But the book is more than just political literature meant to position a candidate; it rings with considerable authenticity.

Testimony was published in the run-up to the 2007 presidential election, in which Sarkozy, a conservative, eventually prevailed over the Socialist candidate, Ségolène Royal. Sarkozy presumably wrote the book to confront a common stereotype that pegged him as a right-wing, George Bush-loving authoritarian who aimed to dismantle France's welfare state and deal ruthlessly with the immigrant "scum" who in 2005 had erupted in riots in the Parisian suburbs.

As a response to such caricature assassination, *Testimony* succeeds: The man reflected in the memoir is a conservative technocrat and a social democrat. He believes the power of the French state can be harnessed to create a more dynamic, innovative, and powerful economy that will help the country compete in a globalized environment. Yet France can accomplish this, he believes, only if individuals are given a chance to succeed. The social democrat in Sarkozy emphasizes the need to maintain a safety net that includes a minimum wage and universal health care. He even wants to introduce affirmative action to France, as well as

increase support for education to help make the country more economically competitive.

Sarkozy the technocrat also has a law-and-order edge, which some perceive as a nativist, anti-immigrant streak. This view of Sarkozy as authoritarian and anti-immigrant—an image spawned by Sarkozy's infamous use of the word "scum" during his tenure as interior minister—is challenged by the president's account of the incident (a telling also supported by nuanced press accounts of the event).

Sarkozy did blurt out that he would work to remove the scum that had carried out the 2005 rioting. But the remark came when an immigrant residing in a hard-hit working-class suburb pleaded with Sarkozy to rid the area of the "scum" who had engaged in violence. Indeed, in the presidential election Sarkozy won pluralities in many immigrant working-class suburbs. And one of his first acts as president was to name a Muslim woman, Rachida Dati, as minister of justice—a woman born of immigrant parents.

Sarkozy himself is the son of a Hungarian immigrant and a French mother with Greek Jewish roots. He has the immigrant's faith that hard work and resourcefulness are the essential traits that lead to success, like the success that he has achieved and that has shaped his political orientation. Because he sees the United States as a shining example of this faith at work, he frequently points in his book to America as evidence that his optimism is not misplaced. Partly as a result, many conservatives in the United States, who in the early days of the Iraq fiasco derided the French as "cheese-eating surrender monkeys," identify Sarkozy as one of them.

This is a mistake. Although Sarkozy may vacation in New England and eat hot dogs with George W. Bush in Kennebunkport, the French president subscribes to a solidly French form of conservatism. At its core, it depends neither on the optimism and free market fetishism of Ronald Reagan nor on the law-and-order ruthlessness of a Frank

Testimony: France in the Twenty-First Century
by Nicolas Sarkozy. Pantheon Books, 2007.

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Rizzo or a J. Edgar Hoover. It derives, Sarkozy says, from France's Gaullist heritage. His reading of President Charles de Gaulle's legacy is radical, however. Like Sarkozy's political program, it emphasizes change.

"General de Gaulle," he argues, "changed French institutions, first by authorizing the vote for women, then by overseeing the development of the Fifth Republic Constitution." Sarkozy goes on to note how de Gaulle also "created the welfare system, the general statute on public service, the National Administration School" (which Sarkozy is the first president not to have attended), and "profit sharing and worker participation." Even the new French franc was a de Gaulle-era creation. Sarkozy drapes his own political program in this heritage, claiming he is doing only what de Gaulle did in leading France to a "clean break" with the past.

That same heritage informs Sarkozy's emphasis on making France an important player in world politics. Here again American conservatives misunderstand him. They believe Sarkozy's pointed remarks about denying Iran a nuclear future mean that he has joined the United States in the "global war on terror." Sarkozy's foreign policy focus, however, is really not dissimilar to President Bill

Clinton's. He wants to position his country as an economic power that can take advantage of globalization. He also has a grander mission: creating what he calls a "politics of civilization to establish France as the soul of the new renaissance that the world needs."

At the moment, this is more a dramatic declaration than a statement of policy, but it indicates that Sarkozy intends for his country to be much more than an obedient ally of Washington. By pursuing a new *mission civilisatrice*, France, according to this view, might help fill the vacuum of world political leadership that the United States has created through the Bush administration's global mismanagement.

Sarkozy's election as president was greeted with chants of "Sarko! Sarko! Sarko!" Since the election, however, his all-too-public divorce, his courting of and recent marriage to an Italian-French supermodel, and his taste for expensive fashion have saddled him with declining popularity and the derisive moniker "President Bling-Bling." A barrage of negative publicity during the campaign led this brusque, assertive, self-confident man to push back with *Testimony*. Perhaps the current onslaught of criticism will provoke a companion volume: *Sarko: Human, All Too Human*. ■



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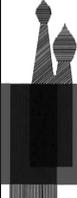
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