



The Silent Bang

by Franz M. Oppenheimer

Late on the Tuesday afternoon when the returns of the first round of France's legislative elections were known, I came downstairs to the bar of our little hotel in the French Alps for a pre-dinner drink. It was late in the skiing season and there were few hotel guests, only the local regulars and the hotel owner, all engaged in a boisterous discussion. Finally, I thought, political passions had surfaced. I was wrong. The discussion was about *boules*, the different rules of the game applied in different cities, and the special qualities of balls of different manufacture. I joined the group, drink in hand, waiting for someone to comment on the collapse of the Socialist Party at the polls. But no one did.

There had been an absence of passion in the campaign: virtually no election posters, few meetings, and no excitement. In the twelfth year of Mitterrand's Socialist presidency, not only the media but also the Socialists themselves said that defeat was inevitable. But the magnitude of the defeat had not been predicted. Pollsters and pundits had counted on a substantial increase in votes for the environmentalists, with whom (and with the Communists) Rocard and some lesser Socialist leaders thought a new "progressive" majority could be put together under the label "Big Bang." In the end, while the Communists managed to increase their pitiful percentage of popular votes from 3.5 to 4.5 percent, and lost only two seats in the National Assembly (keeping just 24 out of 577 seats), the Greens were humiliated, with less than one percent of the popular vote. Jean-Marie Le Pen's right-wing National Front won only 5.6 percent (10 percent had been predicted), and lost its single seat in the National Assembly. Clearly, there was no market for extremism on either side.

Nor was there a market for ideology. The elimination of the left from French

political life—Communists and Socialists combined dropped from 52 percent to 36 percent of the popular vote and won 93 out of 577 seats in the newly elected National Assembly—had little to do with ideology. Polls show that a third of Frenchmen believe that there is no difference between right and left. Corporate middle management constitutes the largest segment of Socialist voters, and workers and the unemployed constitute the largest segment of the radical right. The Socialists are now the party of the bourgeoisie.

The center/right parties, which ran a common campaign and in most places presented a common candidate in the second round of elections, did not increase their percentage of popular votes as spectacularly as their seats: popular votes increased from 47 percent to 55 percent; their seats from 275 to 484—that is, to 84 percent of the total. The right won because voters deserted the left. And the main reasons for that desertion, as enumerated by a veteran French observer, were (1) the evaporation of Marxist ideology, (2) unemployment and economic insecurity, (3) crime, and (4) a series of scandals involving Socialists in high places—from the use of HIV-tainted blood in hospitals to fraudulent financing of campaigns and the acceptance of personal financial favors—some of them, such as Prime Minister Bérégovoy's acceptance of a modest interest-free loan from a friend of thirty years' standing for buying an apartment, as insignificant ethically as the overdrawing of accounts in their own banks by our congressmen.

Americans will recognize the issues that drove the election—crime, corruption, education, and immigration. Even a few days in England and Germany made it plain that the rich countries of the Occident have identical problems. There are homeless in the streets of Bremen, where despite the German recession

shoppers abound. The French press carries stories of arson in the schools during class hours, and of teachers being raped and refusing to come to class out of fear for their safety. Complaints of the decline of literacy are ubiquitous among the still-educated.

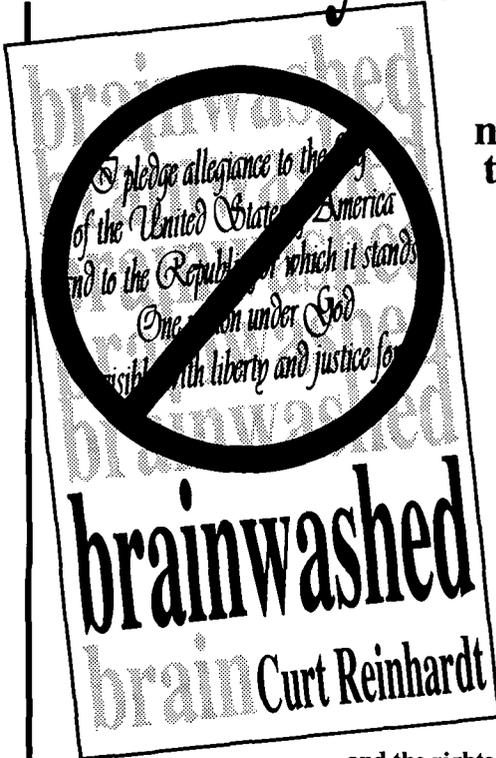
Despite the engagement of French troops in Bosnia and Somalia, foreign policy rarely figured in the list of principal problems. But the diatribes of Jacques Chirac (whose Gaullist RPR party will play a big role in the next government) cast a shadow over the future. Chirac risked dividing his coalition when he attacked GATT and the EC's agricultural policy, and insisted on a strong French voice to speak for Europe against the United States.

Indeed, Chirac's dubious if unspoken premise was that Europe's interests coincide with France's. His rhetoric on trade (which mirrored the Mitterrand government's position) triggered anti-French feelings in Germany. The *International Herald Tribune* reported that a discreet German mission in Paris warned the new French government in April of the serious consequences of sabotaging GATT and the EC agricultural policy. The *Tribune* added that the mission may have issued a veiled threat to withhold support of the French franc. Several German industrialists and bankers told me they couldn't much longer tolerate Kohl's unconditional support for French obstructionism in the EC.

Like the Democrats in the U.S. Congress, the new French government will have two years to reduce unemployment, improve the economy, and rekindle confidence. But France's economy is bound up even more closely than the U.S.'s with world economic conditions. Paradoxically, if the Clinton administration should abort the recovery in the United States, that failure of the left in America might well doom the French right two years from now. □

Franz M. Oppenheimer is a Washington lawyer.

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we have to
take a stance
in support
of those
values we
hold
to be dear.

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personal
life that
time has
arrived.

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the decision
to fight
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and the rights of those I love.

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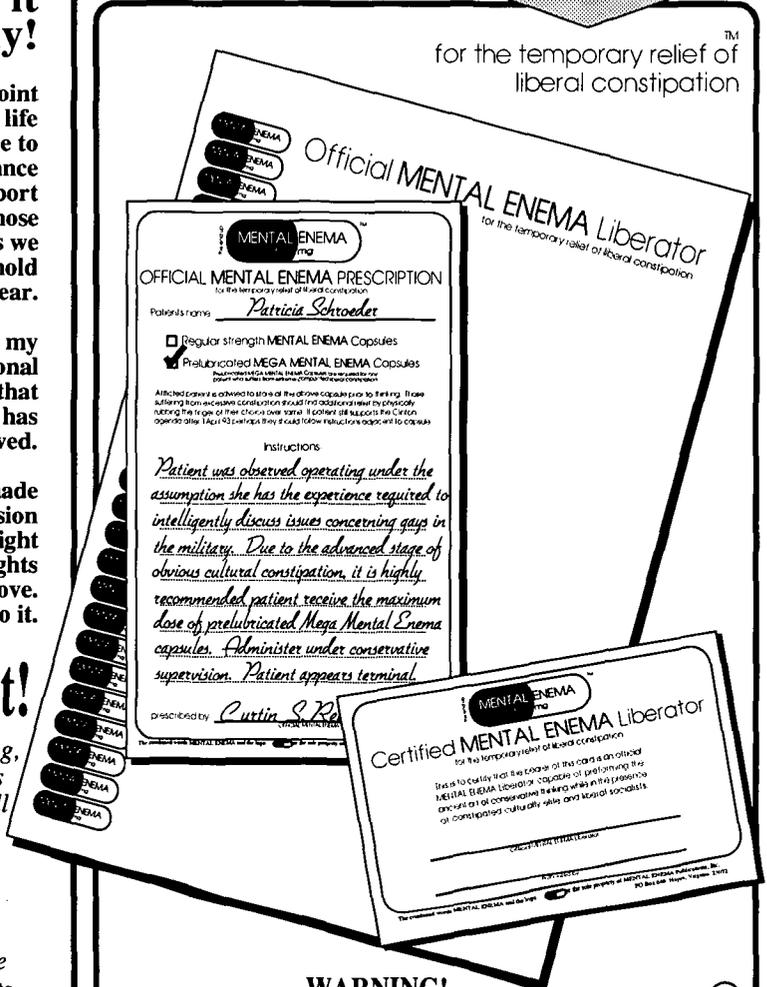
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