

The Almost Impossible Ally: Harold Macmillan and Charles de Gaulle

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Peter Mangold provides here a witty account of the relationship between two statesmen who at the apogee of their careers were respectively British prime minister and president of the French Fifth Republic. Mangold draws on French and British government documents and published documents from the United States, as well as on the private papers of several British ministers and officials, and those of the French diplomat Olivier Wormser. The premise of the book is one of honour not repaid. De Gaulle and Macmillan were wartime allies, the former the obstinate, visionary leader of the Free French, the latter the outwardly able but inwardly anxious resident minister in Algiers. Macmillan assisted de Gaulle's position in North Africa during the war, but when Macmillan needed France's favour to implement Britain's entry to the EEC in 1963, de Gaulle responded with a veto. Macmillan, Mangold concludes, was not only outwitted, but also outclassed by the general, whose hatred of all things American meant that he could never countenance Macmillan's promotion of Anglo-American ties.

The first part of the book is an account of Macmillan and de Gaulle's early lives. Born in the 1890s, there were little obvious similarities in their upbringings. De Gaulle's mother was devoutly religious, his father a minor aristocrat who instilled in his children tales of France's greatness. At military school, the young de Gaulle was noted for his unwillingness to take subordination, as well as his arrogance. De Gaulle fathered three children in an unremarkable marriage. His youngest child, Anne, had Downs Syndrome, but de Gaulle was devoted to her. By contrast, Macmillan's American-born mother dominated him through his education

at Summerfields, Eton, and Oxford. Macmillan's wife, more suited to the role of leader's spouse than de Gaulle's, conducted a life-long affair with Macmillan's friend Robert Boothby. Both de Gaulle and Macmillan, Mangold notes, had a tendency to depression, and both had contemplated suicide, but the differences in their characters were more striking. De Gaulle sought to impose his will on events; Macmillan hoped to manipulate and to influence indirectly.

In part two, Mangold charts the roles of Macmillan and de Gaulle during the extremely difficult negotiations to establish the French Committee of National Liberation (FCNL) in North Africa during the war. Macmillan was appointed resident minister in Algiers in 1943 after the victory of the Allied forces in Operation Torch. At this time, de Gaulle was leader of the Fighting French in exile in London. The Americans wanted General Giraud to lead a new French authority, but Macmillan was instrumental in persuading President Roosevelt, as well as Prime Minister Winston Churchill, to accept de Gaulle as a potential leader. A junior player amongst some heavyweight politicians, he assisted in resolving the crisis of June 1943, helping to persuade de Gaulle against breaking with the French generals. This incident deepened Macmillan and de Gaulle's relationship, moving Macmillan to venture to de Gaulle that their acquaintance might be called 'friendship', a sentiment de Gaulle reciprocated (p. 55). Thereafter, Macmillan helped to convince Churchill and Roosevelt to recognise the FCNL, making it an effective provisional government, with de Gaulle as its prime minister.

Part three begins with a brief treatment of the 1955 Messina conference, the 1956 Suez crisis, and the 1958 Algerian crisis. The latter event was essential in de Gaulle's return to power in France, but the previous two feature mainly as scene-setters for Mangold's subsequent narrative. Macmillan was initially amongst those who misjudged the significance of Messina, in part because of his latent fear of German domination of the continent. As for Suez, Macmillan failed to anticipate American anger at the Anglo-French invasion. In short, Macmillan was out of step with the realities of Britain's declining power position, and faced a rude shock when he became premier after Eden's resignation. Mangold then recounts 'the second act in the Macmillan-de Gaulle drama' (p. 88); Britain's attempt to reconcile itself with the European Community. He connects British efforts to establish a free trade area (FTA) around the EEC in 1956, and Britain's application to join the EEC under certain conditions in 1961-3, with a further story of Britain's efforts to sustain nuclear independence. Simultaneously, de Gaulle sought to pursue greatness for France.

He suggests that de Gaulle sought British assistance to develop the French force de frappe, shortly after the British had decided with the US in 1957 against advancing French nuclear ambitions (p. 101). De Gaulle went on to propose a reorganization of NATO to promote France's position within it, but Macmillan had effectively wasted the only possibility he might have had of bargaining with the general. Consequently, de Gaulle torpedoed British plans for the FTA. Mangold moves on to a discussion of the Berlin crisis and of Macmillan's desire to press for a superpower summit. The Paris summit was Macmillan's personal tragedy, revealing to him that Britain 'counted for nothing'. By contrast, de Gaulle emerged from the affair 'with his reputation enhanced' (p. 137).

The fourth part deals with Britain's EEC application. De Gaulle, Mangold shows, was progressing in his desire to create a 'European Europe', free from Atlantic influence, while Macmillan was moving Britain towards acceptance of a conditional application. Macmillan promoted a 'Grand Design', which, with American agreement, could offer support for France's nuclear weapons programme. However, nobody knew whether the French would consent to admit Britain on the terms Britain demanded. As Wormser put it, this was the '\$64,000 question' (p. 152). Mangold surmises that the British did not adequately address the issue as to whether or not de Gaulle would veto. Macmillan was resting his strategy on the improbable eventuality of hooking de Gaulle with a nuclear offer. Their meeting at Birch Grove in November 1961 did not yield any results, Macmillan remarking that de Gaulle 'goes back to his distrust and dislike, like a dog to his vomit' (p. 166).

At Château de Champs in June 1962, Macmillan made a more earnest attempt to secure future Anglo-French nuclear cooperation. While his presentation made more of an impression on the French general, he was still no further forward in his attempt to convince de Gaulle to admit Britain to the EEC. In December, at Nassau,

Macmillan persuaded President Kennedy to provide Britain with a successor nuclear system to Skybolt. The Americans agreed to supply Polaris, and hoped to create a multilateral force in NATO. Kennedy also conceded to offer Polaris to France, but it was never probable that de Gaulle, wedded to the genuine independence of the French force, would accept. Macmillan went as far as to suggest collaboration in warhead development, but de Gaulle rejected both Britain and the multilateral force. Part of his justification for the rebuttal of Britain was Macmillan's failure systematically to propose defence arrangements that would consolidate Europe against the United States (p. 202).

In conclusion, Mangold explores the failings in Macmillan's policy. Macmillan did not fully understand the general. Flattered by his successes during the Second World War, Macmillan overestimated his capacity to deal with de Gaulle. He failed comprehensively to read de Gaulle as a politician, failing to register his capacity to evade compromises, and the 'intensity of emotional drives' in de Gaulle's foreign policy (p. 216). Macmillan never fully appreciated that British entry, because of Britain's connections with the USA, would endanger France's position in the EEC, and therefore could only be unpalatable to de Gaulle. Thus, in the last instance, Mangold suggests that the impact of de Gaulle's first veto was 'personal' rather than political (p. 219), the final nail in the coffin of a diminishing prime minister. Macmillan, ultimately, was a second-rank premier, unable to outwit a first-rate leader of Britain's ally and rival.

This book provides an assessment of Macmillan's private thinking towards de Gaulle. In 1944, in his valedictory despatch from Algiers, Macmillan observed that the general was beset with 'a terrible mixture of inferiority complex and spiritual pride...characteristic of the sad situation into which France has fallen. I have often felt that the solutions here could not be dealt with by politicians. They are rather problems for the professional psychiatrist' (p. 69). Drawing on Macmillan's memoirs and diaries, Mangold illuminates some aspects of the complex question of why Macmillan chose to negotiate with de Gaulle when he was always likely to obstruct British accession to the EEC. To do so, Mangold highlights the strands of Macmillan's personality that made his failure more likely. He was vain and inwardly feeble, he was unable to take charge of events and had to rely on underhand tactics, and he was falsely impressed by his formative experience in Algiers. Moreover, Mangold adds to our understanding of the personal diplomacy between the two men. Discussing Germany in 1959, Macmillan and de Gaulle held the following exchange: '[Macmillan said] he liked some Germans. Dr Adenauer for example was a good man. President de Gaulle agreed that Dr Adenauer was good. The prime minister said that with some other Germans one could not be quite sure. President de Gaulle agreed that one could never be sure with the Germans' (p. 120). He also includes some amusing anecdotes. The image of Macmillan bathing naked while de Gaulle sat rigidly in his military uniform is striking (p. 1). When de Gaulle visited Birch Grove, the French delegation clashed with Macmillan's cook because they wanted to store de Gaulle's blood supplies in the fridge, and Macmillan's gamekeeper was incensed that de Gaulle's security men kept disturbing the pheasants (p. 163).

However, the focus of the book raises some fundamental problems. Mangold has eschewed traditional biography. Given the number of biographical works, particularly concerning de Gaulle, this is understandable, but a biography would provide the space to explore individual motivation within the context in which decisions were taken. Instead, he has chosen a dual-character study, which confines him to an investigation of the moments at which the two lives intersected. His justification for this approach is that the Anglo-American 'special relationship' is often considered in terms of the friendships between the two leaders (p. 2). Indeed, personal dynamics do go some way to explaining the complexities of inter-state relations, but Mangold does not reference any works that weave together the lives of a British and American leader in the way he has attempted. De Gaulle and Macmillan were no Hitler and Stalin. Neither man radically changed the course of history (p. 213). The question is why he has chosen to investigate the political lives of de Gaulle and Macmillan from the wartime onwards, rather than a study of both as leaders together. The consequence of the twin-biography emphasis is to bring together otherwise unconnected events: the creation of a Provisional French government in Algiers in 1943-4 and Britain's first failure to enter the EEC between 1961 and 1963.

This slant creates difficulties. Despite his stated intention to explore the relations between Britain and France in the manner in which the 'the special relationship' has been studied, Mangold reaches few wider

conclusions as to the Anglo-French dynamic. His work is informed by the view that 1940 and 1963 represent two moments at which the differentials in British and French power were evident. The war was Britain's 'finest hour' and France's 'lowest ebb' (p. 26). Following the war, Britain's global status was in question, while the French struggled to recover from their humiliation; 'the spectre of decline stalked Macmillan and de Gaulle' (p. 92). Nuclear weaponry created a tangible measure of each country's worth, as each 'increasingly jostled for primacy at the top of the second league' (p. 94). By mid-1962, 'the erosion of Britain's international position was visibly accelerating' (p. 179). At the December 1962 Rambouillet meeting, de Gaulle told Peyrefitte that 'England's back is broken' (p. 186). At the time of his veto at the January 1963 press conference, Britain sustained 'by far the most serious damage' (p. 200), leading to 'injured national pride' (p. 205).

This preoccupation with the shifting power positions of both countries is the subtext to Mangold's twin-biography focus. Macmillan and de Gaulle are, to some extent, metaphors for their countries' fortunes. In 1943, Macmillan was a junior minister on the up, lending his support to de Gaulle against Giraud in the negotiations about the FCNL. By 1963, Macmillan was a tired prime minister, acknowledging that France's veto had shattered his hopes; 'all our policies at home and abroad are in ruins'. Part of Macmillan's impotent strategy with the general was his expectation that de Gaulle should repay Macmillan, and, by corollary, that France should repay Britain, for the favours conferred during the war. 'De Gaulle recalled Churchill's alleged comment on the eve of D-Day, that if forced to choose between Europe and the open sea, he would always opt for the latter'. Slightly startled, Macmillan noted the necessity Britain had been under at the time, pointedly adding that when Britain had had the choice in the Second World War, she had stood alone to defend the independence of Europe. This, Macmillan records de Gaulle acknowledged 'rather ungraciously' (p. 185). Instead, de Gaulle outfoxed his British counterpart. As such, Mangold adds little to widespread popular presumptions about Anglo-French relations. Britain and France were friends, but also enemies, and Britain's relative decline led her to become a demandeur to the nation she had saved during the war.

Although Mangold has used sources from both Britain and France, and published documents from the USA (published documents from the Federal Republic of Germany also feature in his bibliography), the narrative of his story rests largely with Britain. He does not, therefore, engage with many recent debates concerning de Gaulle's policy. Any scholar of French foreign policy in the 1960s is faced with the challenge that de Gaulle's hand is largely absent from the archival documents, a gap that is particularly striking in contrast to British government documents. Even the papers of the presidency in the Archives Nationales, 5AG, contain only fleeting glimpses of de Gaulle's contribution. Small surprise, then, that Mangold is largely reliant on de Gaulle's memoirs to explain his dealings with the British prime minister. This is understandable, but Mangold does not engage with scholarly attempts to come to terms with the uneven documentary coverage of de Gaulle's position. In particular, distinguished commentators such as Andrew Moravcsik and Alan Milward, amongst others, have emphasized the importance of economic factors in determining de Gaulle's attitude towards enlargement of the EEC (1). Their approach reveals the significance of the emerging Common Agricultural Policy to de Gaulle, which in turn adds greater complexity to de Gaulle's observation that Britain would always prefer the 'open sea' to Europe. Moreover, Mangold accepts that visceral anti-Atlanticism motivated de Gaulle, eliding debates as to the more constructive nature of France's desire to create a 'European Europe'. Of course, de Gaulle wanted to lead Europe, and of course he knew that British entry would encourage the Five to look towards the Atlantic ideals against which he strove. The point is that to ignore the economic and Community contexts of de Gaulle's policy is to elevate the significance of personal diplomacy between the two men. Put like this, the mistakes were all Macmillan's to make. With de Gaulle's attitude set, it could only be left to Macmillan, his pro-American credentials in his blood, to misunderstand it.

Mangold's concentration on high-level diplomacy further leads him to take out of context critical moments on the British side. For example, his discussion of the Cabinet's decision to apply for EEC membership focuses on the fact that the British did not adequately discuss the prospect of a Gaullist veto. He does mention that one cause of this was the extreme national importance of the decision as Britain's options narrowed (pp. 155–8). However, Mangold places undue weight on Macmillan's private judgement regarding

the likelihood of de Gaulle's reaction, and thus on Macmillan's nuclear strategies to overcome him. Comprehension of the domestic scene makes clear that ministers could not permit the prospect of de Gaulle's obstruction to prevent them from advancing towards the EEC. Opposition to the initiative at home, not to mention in the Commonwealth, meant that Macmillan had to tread a very fine line in winning support for the application. To do so whilst acknowledging a certain veto would have been inconceivable. In fact, Mangold does his subject a disservice. Although Macmillan was over-optimistic, even deluded, about the prospects of swaying the general through a nuclear deal, one has to ask what choice had he? Macmillan resolved, it could be said bravely, to lead Britain down the path to EEC membership. With de Gaulle opposed to the initiative, it would scarcely have been credible for the prime minister not even to attempt to woo him with a personal meeting. When placed within the confines of politics at home, Macmillan's approach can be more fairly measured.

Finally, Mangold does not engage with the debate as to the relative importance of the nuclear question both in Britain's strategy to attain EEC entry, and in France's ability to reject them. Viewed through the lens of Macmillan's diary and de Gaulle's memoirs, the nuclear question looms large. Both were politicians attracted to the 'grand design' and neither were engaged in the day-to-day dealings of the Brussels negotiations at which Britain's accession was being discussed. Macmillan may have felt that the outcome of the talks rested exclusively on his own ability to provide de Gaulle an offer he could not refuse. However, for sixteen months delegates from the Six, the Commission, and Britain debated whether the burgeoning Community could meet Britain's demands for safeguards in advance of entry. Piers Ludlow's research, conducted in the archives of member states and the European Commission, shows that the argument for British accession was fought and lost in these debates (2). This does not suggest that de Gaulle ever felt inclined to admit Britain, but that de Gaulle and France's power rested on the willingness or otherwise of France's five partners to accept a unilateral judgement. De Gaulle had to couch his rejection in terms acceptable to opinion within the Community, and Britain's inflexibility regarding the terms of entry gave him the possibility to do so. Thus, Macmillan's mistakes may have been less in his fantasy in dealing with the general, than in his unwillingness to persuade the Cabinet to accept a compromise from the Six. More decisive and earlier concessions from Britain could have forced the general's hand. Mangold adds little to what is already known about a potential nuclear deal. By ignoring recent research, he also misses the opportunity for a more rounded critique of Macmillan's position.

On a technical level, the book is simply written, with chapters of a well-judged length. However, the clarity is marred by a tendency to place together several citations in one footnote. Unfortunately, this leads to some confusion as to the derivation of particular information. For example, the papers of Olivier Wormser are mentioned directly as evidence that Wormser was 'anything but well disposed to the British bid'. Although Wormser's papers are cited in the bibliography (they are in the Quai d'Orsay for the time at which he was Secretary-General of the Quai), the footnote points us to Sir Eric Roll's memoirs and a Foreign Office document (p. 152). After an excellent quote from de Gaulle, a footnote refers us to a page in Piers Ludlow's book (a quick check revealed the de Gaulle quote does not reside there), and another Foreign Office document (p. 161). A further paragraph discusses a British intelligence report that claimed that de Gaulle was certain to veto, a de Gaulle interview with Pierson Dixon, Macmillan's reaction in his diary, and some speculation from Dixon as to the general's mood (pp. 182–3). The single footnote at the end of the paragraph references a de Zulueta memo, several Foreign Office telegrams, Macmillan's diary, and an article. It would take some determination to search these references for the source of each piece of information. Such uncertain footnoting occurs sufficiently regularly to mar at least this readers' appreciation of the text.

Notes

1. A. Milward, *The United Kingdom and the European Community, volume 1: The Rise and Fall of National Strategy 1945–63* (London, 2002); A. Moravcsik, *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht* (Ithaca, 1998). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. N. P. Ludlow, *Dealing with Britain: the Six and the First UK Application to the EEC* (Cambridge 1997). [Back to \(2\)](#)

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