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FALKLANDS FRENCH PERFORMANCE
(Her Majesty's Ambassador at Paris to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs)

1. The French government's support for Britain was immediate and of value. Reasons were Mitterrand's view that France owed Britain a debt from World War II, consideration of France's own Overseas Territories; and a wish to demonstrate France's firm membership of the Western camp. French public opinion broadly reflected this support (paras 1-4).
2. Doubt about French policy most widespread among the "professionals" - politicians, journalists and civil servants. The Quai was especially flabby, fearing that what they termed the British "fiasco" would jeopardise France's plans to increase her influence and economic stake in Latin America. Strongest pressure on French government to break ranks with the UK came from the French arms lobby. If the conflict had gone on much longer or if British success had been only partial, Mitterrand's support would have been more hesitant and qualified (paras 5-8).
3. We should be grateful to the French, but not to the point that they are encouraged to try to take advantage of our gratitude. We should nevertheless share with them the military lessons to be drawn (para 9).
4. The affair illustrated a number of aspects of the French government's foreign policy: consultations with the US and with the FRG and Italy; the attachment to its North-South policy; and the importance of arms sales (para 10).
5. The French do not accept the British claim to sovereignty over the Falklands, and are unlikely to be persuaded to do so. But there are signs that they feel vulnerable over their overseas possessions. The French respect success: Britain's success in the Falklands has enhanced our reputation (paras 11-12).

Sir

Paris
30 June 1982

1. The French response to the Falkland Islands threw light on French attitudes and policies. It is worth analysing it, particularly to see what implications there may be for HMG and for Franco-British relations.
2. The French government's initial reaction was admirable. Mitterrand immediately ordered full support for Britain, an order which was translated into French help in establishing the EC embargo on arms and trade and into French support for Resolution 502. We received valuable practical help from the French armed forces on matters relating to the performance of French weapons systems in service with the Argentine forces. Mitterrand undoubtedly deserves substantial credit for this reaction. I doubt whether Giscard (or Chirac) would have responded so well.

Mitterrand clearly nourishes a warm regard for Britain stemming from World War II. He stated publicly more than once that France owed Britain a debt of gratitude. He repeated it to the Germans and most recently to the Spaniards.

3. He was influenced in his decision by other considerations. He recognised of course that France too had an interest in seeing international law upheld, not only for the sake of principle but also because of France's own overseas territories. In addition I think that he was conscious, especially at the beginning of the crisis, as indeed he has been throughout his first year in office, of the need for socialist France to demonstrate its reliability as a member of the Western camp.

4. There were strong currents in French public opinion which favoured the British action. The majority of the Left were pleased to see Britain standing up against a repressive and dictatorial regime. On the Right, people felt that Britain was acting for the West as a whole in resisting aggression. The Embassy received a number of letters and telephone calls, some from prominent individuals, who recalled Britain's role in 1940. On the whole this favourable attitude predominated and was reflected – though by no means uniformly – in the media.

5. But there were currents flowing in the opposite direction which, if we had been less successful, could well have proved stronger. From the start a minority of the Socialist Party were uneasy about supporting Britain on the grounds that British action was "colonialist". There were fears that Britain was going too far and was liable to drag France into a war. It seemed to irk some Frenchmen that "decadent" Britain was proving that it was a power to be reckoned with after all.

6. Doubts about French policy seemed to be most widespread among the professionals – politicians, journalists and civil servants. The Quai d'Orsay was particularly flabby. The Quai's inclinations came out into the open when a memorandum by the Director for American Affairs about the British "fiasco" was leaked. They seemed to see, inaccurately as it turned out, their schemes for extending French influence in Latin America going wrong. I was given a sermon by the Secretary General of the Quai on 11 June about the danger of poisoning the atmosphere between Europe and Latin America if we drove the Argentines off the islands. Crocodile tears were shed over the damage we were alleged to be doing to US interests by providing openings for the Russians and Cubans. There was fear that attempts to increase France's economic stake in Latin America would be jeopardised.

7. The strongest pressure on the government to break ranks with the UK came from the arms lobby. There may have been pressures too from other parts of the government because of the importance of arms sales to France's balance of payments. These pressures created a curious psychological climate. One might have expected that it would be generally regarded as inconceivable, especially in the Quai d'Orsay, for France to supply arms which would be used against an ally at war. Instead, those concerned seemed increasingly to regard their agreement to our requests as an exceptional favour.

8. Given these pressures, we were lucky to have had Mitterrand as President. If Giscard or Chirac would have been less keen to support us at the beginning they would have been even less inclined to have stuck with us to the end. Even so, Mitterrand himself wavered from time to time under the various pressures I have described, especially from the arms salesmen. If the conflict had gone on much longer or if the British success had been only partial, Mitterrand's support for Britain would probably have become more and more hesitant and qualified.

9. In evaluating the French response we also have to keep in mind that at the moment of maximum British preoccupation with the Falklands crisis Mitterrand chose to move against us quite ruthlessly in the Community, over the agricultural prices and budget issue; and he went on to threaten us gratuitously with a crisis over the nature of British membership. So while we must not be churlish, we should be on our guard against allowing the French to take undue advantage of our gratitude for the support they extended. We must remind them that it would have been highly abnormal if we had not had the support of our neighbour and ally, and of how we recognised their interests and responded to their requests (eg over Astiz). At the same time I am sure it would be right (as well as being in our interests) to give the French as much information as possible about the military lessons to be drawn from the conflict and about the performance of the weapons used in it.

10. The affair well illustrated the supremacy of the French President in making French policy. It also illustrated other aspects of the present Government's foreign policy. There appears to have been a good deal of consultation with Washington, extending to an attempt to agree a common line. The French press claimed repeatedly that both the US government and their own were insisting on a return to the negotiating table with Argentina. This bid for a common approach may have reflected both the special interest the French government has in Latin America and also the wider habit of Franco-US cooperation established over the last 18 months (but which may look less healthy post-Versailles and post-Lebanon). There seems to have been also considerable Franco-German and Franco-Italian consultation. The affair illustrated the importance the French government attaches to its North-South policy, even to the extent of putting its relations with its Western allies under strain. It also showed that in contrast with the UK and especially with the attitude of the British Labour Party, the question of arms sales gives rise to very little debate in Socialist France.

11. The French do not accept the British claim to sovereignty over the Falklands. They are likely to call on us again to negotiate with Argentina if a stable government emerges there. They will probably not be convinced by the arguments we shall advance to justify our claim to sovereignty, but may respond to warnings about the danger of tearing up long established territorial arrangements and to the simple argument that we assume that the French would not expect to be told by us what to do with their overseas possessions. The signs are that they are feeling vulnerable over these and are studying both political and military ways of avoiding a similar problem arising for them.

12. The French respect success. Britain's success in the Falklands has enhanced our reputation.

13. I am sending copies of this despatch to Her Majesty's Representatives at European Community posts, Her Majesty's Ambassador at Washington, the UK Permanent Representative to the United Nations and the UK Permanent Representative on the North Atlantic Council.

I have the honour to be,
Sir, your obedient servant

John Fretwell