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BRITISH EMBASSY,
PARIS.

FROM THE AMBASSADOR

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Dear David,

COHABITATION AND CHIRAC

1. In preparation for the Prime Minister's visit next week I should let you have some comments on the present state of relations between Mitterrand and Chirac and more generally on Chirac's performance.

2. Cohabitation is generating more friction than during the summer but does not appear likely to break down in the near future. Mitterrand and Chirac are both laying more emphasis on the competitive rather than cooperative nature of their relations than a few months ago. Several factors push them in this direction:

(a) although the French public still approve cohabitation and want it to go the full term, up to the 1988 Presidential elections, it no longer generates so much interest or curiosity as an idea. People accept that it can be made to work and are now thinking more about the phase which will eventually follow.

(b) The Presidential elections, now less than eighteen months away, exercise a centrifugal pull on all parts of the political spectrum. The leading politicians are starting to position themselves to run against each other rather than temporarily to work with each other. This affects the cohesion of the majority, since Barre will certainly be running against Chirac. But more important, it means that Mitterrand and Chirac are now increasingly concerned with the question of how to defeat each other.

(c) Chirac has risen strongly in the opinion polls, outdistancing Barre. Some polls suggest he is a possible victor against Mitterrand. Although many believe that he

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many yet commit some irreparable error (and last week's events, including the Washington Times interview, strengthen that supposition) he has successfully used the Prime Ministership to project himself before the public and must now be taken very seriously by Mitterrand as the man he has to stop.

(d) Chirac has been deliberately trampling on the President's preserves in foreign and defence policy. Mitterrand has always rejected the Gaullist idea of the "domaines réservés" but maintains that the President has a major role in foreign affairs and the ultimate determining role in matters of defence policy (because his finger is on the nuclear button). He has firmly asserted his views on two points where Chirac appeared to be questioning standard doctrine (a possible tactical role for nuclear weapons; and a greater priority for the land-based leg of the nuclear triad); and he has publicly stated the view that solidarity against terrorist crime must prevail over the arrangements and interests of individual States. On the defence issues, Chirac has been obliged to back down, at least for the present.

(e) Tension has increased in the last week or two precisely because Chirac is on a knife-edge. He has gambled - successfully up to a point - on getting out some or all of the French hostages, hoping for a wave of popular sympathy which will overshadow the dubious dealings leading up to their release. But his record on handling Syria and Iran could yet create doubts, not only in the minds of the opposition, about his suitability for high office. Chirac knows that he is exposed and that Mitterrand would be well-placed to exploit the situation if something went wrong.

3. It has become increasingly clear in recent months that Chirac is the man who is running France. Mitterrand scores a point from time to time; and informed French public opinion still gives much weight to his pronouncements, mainly on the grounds that the French public is "Constitutionalist" and is accustomed to vesting great authority in the President. Hence Chirac and the government would lose ground if they appeared to act openly in defiance of the President's expressed views. There is something in this, although I also have the impression that when he makes a pronouncement (eg on the need for solidarity against terrorism) Mitterrand is unsure quite how much attention anyone will pay to his views in practice. Chirac does not seem to have been over-impressed. Leaving aside occasional declarations

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of this sort, it seems clear that the governmental machine is dominated to a quite extraordinary extent by Chirac. He has managed to cut off direct contact between the Ministries and the Elysée: apart from Mitterrand's weekly meetings with the Foreign and Defence Ministers and the routine, but often patchy, passing of briefing and telegrams from the Quai, official contact appears to be limited to that between the President and the Prime Minister personally, the weekly meeting of the Council of Ministers - a rather formal affair - and one authorised channel between the Secretary-General of the Elysée and Chirac's Directeur du Cabinet. The Elysée is thus not only deprived of the traditional means of pulling strings within the government machine, it is more or less totally detached from it. In contrast, it appears that all the government departments submit to Matignon on decisions of any importance. Chirac and his entourage have an insatiable appetite for decision-making.

4. This is one feature of Chirac's hyper-activity. The man is phenomenal. He is not alone amongst world figures in needing only a few hours sleep a night, but there can be few who try so restlessly to jam more activity into every twenty-four hours. Not content with running the government of France, he keeps up his roles as Mayor of Paris, as leader of the RPR and even as President of the Departmental Council of the Corrèze. He travels and makes major speeches frequently in France and is competing with Mitterrand for journeys overseas as well. He is aiming to mark and match the President at all top level gatherings - the Summit Seven, the European Council, the Franco-African Summit, bilateral Summits, etc. He is involved in complex political manoeuvring not only against Mitterrand but also against his own potential rivals on the Right. He is working with and depending on the UDF, while quite possibly plotting to split it in two. Above all he is preparing his run at the Elysée, with all that that involves.

5. With all this pressure of activity Chirac is inevitably appearing in his true colours: even he would not have the time or capacity to do all this and maintain an elaborate disguise too. The picture which emerges is not surprising to anyone who saw Chirac at work as Minister of Agriculture or later as Prime Minister under Giscard. It is just more accentuated. Not for nothing did Pompidou call him "my bulldozer". The picture which emerges is of a man who has never paused to work out a coherent view of what he wants to achieve beyond

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climbing up each successive rung of the ladder towards the supreme position of the Presidency. Problems are dealt with in haste by snap decisions with little concern for coherence or coordination. Chirac seems to regard five minutes as a long time in politics. Though personally warm, friendly, engaging and greatly liked and admired by those who work closely with him, he has a pronounced streak of ruthlessness. He would not let anyone or anything stand in his way, certainly not a personal or political friendship or some commitment undertaken yesterday. Some people believe that all this will stand in the way of his winning the Presidency, that at the end of the day France will want someone with more solidity, stature and intellectual coherence to serve as the "Père du pays".

6. When decisions come forward to him I do not think Chirac would ever pause to seek more information, or ask to argue them out, look for different points of view or even seriously think about the issues. His watchword is to get cracking. If something is shown to have gone wrong, a good yank at the tiller should bring it right a day or two later. On what then does he base his decisions on day-to-day affairs? I think the answer is a mixture of the influence of those individuals who are close to him and sheer instinct. Over the years he has accumulated some odd baggage in both respects. On domestic economic policy he has the sound and steady influence of Balladur at his elbow. On matters affecting terrorism and the Middle East he may be less well served: Pasqua is a rogue; and some of Chirac's ideas on foreign affairs seem to emanate from the murkier quarters of the DGSE, some Arab Ambassadors to whom he has close personal ties, the Quai's professional Arabists and the traditional Gaullists. The role of Roussin, ex-DGSE, as his Chef de Cabinet may be significant.

7. When Chirac believes something he tends to believe it passionately and to forget if in the first instance he only believed it because it was convenient. Since he is not a man to check and cross-check his facts, his beliefs tend to be self-reinforcing. He is not given to intellectual doubts or questionings. Confronted with awkward facts about the activities of the Syrian Ambassador in London he dismisses with one sweep of the hand the reliability of all Western intelligence services which, he says, are penetrated by moles and, he implies, mendacious to boot. If it is awkward to follow British suggestions on policy towards Syria, those suggestions are distorted and exaggerated; and a string of reasons provided

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to show that the British are up to no good. How much of all this Chirac actually believes is another question. It is convenient to his purpose of the moment, so its accuracy is of no particular importance, but in fact he probably does believe most of it at the time he says it. And to be fair I must record that some Frenchmen - Cheysson, André Fontaine, even Jean-Louis Bianco in private conversation - have spoken approvingly of the apparent sweep of Chirac's vision on the Middle East. Most of us are less impressed.

8. Life with Chirac as Prime Minister will never be entirely easy. Life with Chirac as President, exercising the full panoply of Presidential power as he most certainly would wish to, would be hazardous for Anglo-French relations, for the European Community, for any semblance of coordinated activity in foreign policy and possibly at the end of the day for the Alliance as well. He is impulsive, unpredictable and headstrong; and the instincts which guide his snap judgements derive at least in part from prejudices by no means friendly to the UK.

9. Despite all that we have to live with him. We might possibly have to for a long time. We can only do our best to encourage him to take a broader, calmer and more considered view of events and to restrain his tendency to lash out whenever things do not go his way. When the Prime Minister sees him on 21 November she will not have an easy task - although he will probably be disarmingly repentant about one or two of the things he is alleged to have said. I believe he genuinely likes and admires Mrs Thatcher and will pay due regard to what she says. It will therefore be an important opportunity to put him straight on a few of his wilder allegations, to make him think again about certain aspects of his policies including the weight to be given to countering terrorism, and to make him realise that what he says is noted and is liable to be challenged. I shall make some suggestions on this by telegram; this letter fills in the background.

*Yours ever,
John*

John Fretwell

cc: Sir Julian Bullard KCMG,
HM Ambassador, BONN