

SAVING TELEGRAM

FROM PARIS

CONFIDENTIAL

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SAVING TO (FOR INFO) EC POSTS, WASHINGTON, MOSCOW, UKDel NATO, HMCGs IN FRANCE

MY SAVING TELNO 5 OF 3 FEBRUARY : FRENCH INTERNAL POLITICS

SUMMARY

1. The focus recently has been on the Barre-Chirac duel, with Chirac getting the better of it. Barre, who is handicapped by his own contradictions, has begun to accelerate. His supporters hope that the tortoise with a turbo will now regain lost ground. Chirac will try hard to stop him. Mitterrand hopes their battle will hamper the Right's prospects. He does not want either to establish a commanding lead on the Right.

DETAIL

2. In recent days the political focus has been on the battle between Barre and Chirac for the support of the orthodox Right. Chirac's fast start has boosted him in the opinion polls to the point where most now show him to have a slight edge over Barre (a reversal of the position a month ago). Barre insists that this is a temporary phenomenon and that, in due course, he will retake the lead. His supporters hope he is right but their morale is currently fragile; the RPR in contrast can barely suppress its glee.

3. Private contacts confirm that, perhaps prematurely, the Chirac camp think that they have got Barre on the run. They believe he is caught in a series of contradictions of his own making:-

- he continues to deplore cohabitation and yet the opinion polls show that a majority of the electorate accept that it has been a temporary necessity, and give credit to Mitterrand and Chirac for making it work;
- he disapproves of some of the policies followed by the Chirac government since March 1986, yet political circumstances have obliged him to vote loyally for them in Parliament. At the same time he cannot attack the present government's performance without infuriating and alienating the leaders of the UDF who have participated in that government (indeed Léotard has made it a condition of his and the Parti Républicain's support that Barre does not challenge the government's record);

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- he disdains political parties and yet needs their organisation and expertise if he is to win the election. He insists on the direct link between the presidential candidate and the elector and yet is apparently unwilling or unable to do anything to soften a distant, pedagogic manner. The voters respect him but they do not find him appealing. (Barre's reluctance to make any gestures towards the press party that accompanies him everywhere is not best calculated to help his cause either);
- his self-conscious projection of himself as the man to whom France can now turn and so avoid national decline is, for the moment anyway, mistimed. After the student troubles of December 1986, or even last October after the stock market crash, the electorate was unsettled and looking for reassurance. That mood has passed. The signs are now that voters may find Chirac's promises of a dynamic future more seductive than Barre's promises of a safe one. (The cynics are saying that what Barre needs is another stock market collapse.)

4. Are Barre's difficulties temporary, as he claims, or is the campaign at a turning point? The last few days have seen determined efforts by the Barre camp to regain momentum following the formal announcement of his candidature in Lyon on 8 February. A series of media appearances and campaign rallies is planned over the next few days, as well as a large Convention designed to «enthron» him as the UDF candidate. His supporters are hoping fervently that the polls will soon respond favourably to the tortoise with a turbo.

5. Chirac will do his best, short of creating a serious breach within the majority, to see that they do not. He is marking Barre at every turn, echoing his propositions, and trying to cap Barre's meetings with bigger and more spectacular ones of his own. The RPR machine is already in overdrive. Chirac has adopted an entirely new format at his rallies, sitting relaxed on stage in conversation with half a dozen «typical electors» and discussing their hopes and preoccupations. These are no doubt carefully choreographed, but they make Chirac appear comfortable and approachable, contrasting sharply with the formality of Barre.

6. It is rumoured that Mitterrand may announce his intentions on 8 March (two months before the second round: 25 April and 8 May have now been officially confirmed as the dates for the election). The polls have him solidly ahead in both rounds. The almost universal assumption remains that he intends to run again. Meanwhile he has kept himself in the limelight with a visit to Réunion which has provided useful publicity for him as the President rassembleur. He pays a State visit to Dublin at the end of the month - another «presidential» activity. He will be watching the Barre/Chirac contest closely, and will be pleased that Chirac has his nose in front since the polls suggest that he should be the easier of the two to beat in the second round. But he will not want either to open up a clear lead; much better from Mitterrand's point of view that the Right should remain almost evenly divided than that it should rally to a single champion who might more easily acquire the momentum needed to capture the Elysée.