

SAVING TELEGRAM
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HMCGs IN FRANCE

MY SAVING TELNO 9 OF 22 FEBRUARY 1988 : THE FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTIONS

SUMMARY

1. The presidential campaign is on hold, waiting for Mitterrand. Chirac's machine shows its class; Barre's is ramshackle in comparison. Mitterrand emphasises his presidential role, reinforcing the carefully cultivated image of national rassembleur. The Right know they must counter this if they are to win.

DETAIL

2. The momentum generated by Chirac's and Barre's formal declarations of their candidacies has spent itself. Both continue to give speeches and tour the country, but there is at present more sound than fury. The campaign is on hold as all await Mitterrand's announcement, now variously rumoured for 10, 15, 19 or 20 March. (Barre himself told us yesterday that he expects it to be earlier rather than later.)

3. There has been little change in the opinion polls in recent days, a reflection of the current lull. Mitterrand's ratings have slipped a point or two to 36 or 37% in the first round; Barre and Chirac remain locked together on about 20% each, some polls giving Barre the edge, others Chirac. For the moment the battle on the Right is too close to call, although a front-runner may emerge once the Socialists have an official candidate (which nearly all now assume will be Mitterrand) and a war of movement begins.

4. The first six weeks of the campaign have confirmed the supremacy of Chirac's RPR machine compared to the ramshackle UDF organisation available to (and despised by) Barre. The RPR are playing a team game: Le Pen is effectively marked by Pasqua, who delivers weekly successes on the law and order front which may have more to do with programming by the Interior Ministry than with regular breakthroughs by the police; and Balladur fulfills a similar «marking» role in respect to Barre, playing the stern, hard-headed economist, supervising the economy with a calm determination worthy of Professor Barre himself. In addition, Chirac is careful to give a prominent role to younger RPR Ministers who have made their mark in the past two years, such as Séguin, Juppé and the telegenic Mme Barzach, with the aim of projecting an image of youth and dynamism.

/5. Barre's

5. Barre's campaign has seemed plodding in comparison. To some extent this is inevitable: he has always made much of being his own man, neither the leader nor creature of any political party. Nevertheless the price of this independence is that he bears the brunt of electioneering himself and leaves the parties of the UDF uncertain how to deploy in support and quarrelling among themselves. He has made a self-conscious effort in the last ten days to associate the UDF more obviously with his candidacy, suddenly finding nice things to say about Léotard and taking him on a trip to Corsica, where they surprised the crowd by singing regional songs together. Such gestures may help, but overall Barre's campaign has so far lacked the orchestrated impact of Chirac's.

6. Mitterrand continues to capitalise on his presidential status, for the moment leaving it to others to be mere candidates. Highly publicised foreign visits to Ireland and to the NATO Summit, and eye-catching domestic initiatives to talk to a class of immigrant children in Paris or to inspect storm damage in Brittany, ensure constant and largely uncontroversial exposure. At present his strategy appears to be to emphasise his role as the guarantor of the nation's interests, able to calm passions and unite the country around his enlightened leadership.

7. This carefully constructed image of the philosopher king is attractive to many voters and both the Barre and Chirac camps are trying hard to counter it, reminding the electorate of the Mitterrand of 1981 who was swept to power with 110 Socialist propositions in his pocket tailored exclusively to the interests of the Left. So far their efforts to paint him as an old man with an aggressively ideological past and no programme for the future have shown little sign of hitting home. They argue that this will change if and when he becomes the Socialists' official candidate: the outcome of the election may turn on whether this calculation is correct.

8. To the extent that forecasts from me at this stage are worthwhile, the indications are for a messy rather than a tidy aftermath to the election on 8 May. I shall explore this prospect more fully in subsequent reporting.



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