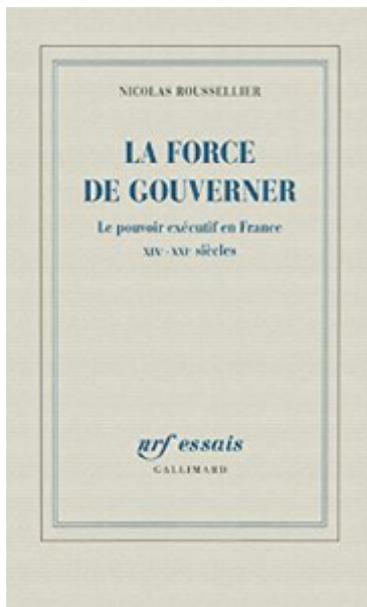


Nicolas Roussellier, *La Force de gouverner. Le pouvoir exécutif en France XIX^e-XXI^e siècles*, Paris, Gallimard, 2015, 827 p.

Philip Nord



The balance between the legislative and executive branches of government in France has undergone a sea change since the nineteenth century. The constitutional battles of the 1870s had given birth to a Republic, the nation's Third, that placed parliament, as the expression of the national will, at the center of public life. Republicans, so many of whom had cut their political teeth battling against Bonapartist authoritarianism, held “personal power” in deep suspicion and made sure that the new Republic's President didn't have the instruments at hand to become a latter-day Caesar. But come the Fifth Republic, and all this had changed. Since 1962, the President has been elected by the people; it is he (to date all Presidents have been men) who embodies the will of the nation; and it is he who sets the agenda, proposing laws to parliament, managing the rhythms of debate, and in the right circumstances governing outright by decree without benefit of legislative sanction. How did such a dramatic volte-face

come about? This is the subject of Nicolas Roussellier's thoughtful and expansive new book.

Nicolas Roussellier has published on the parliamentary mores of the Third Republic, a regime whose *modus operandi* he knows well. The President of the Republic in those by-gone days was chosen by the two houses of parliament sitting in joint session, and the custom was to select a personality of a conciliatory nature. The President had ceremonial functions to perform but not much of a budget to work with and, as a result, not much of an entourage either, especially before the First World War. The center of political gravity lay elsewhere, in parliament even more than in the office of the Prime Minister, and to make the point, Nicolas Roussellier analyzes the passage of the 1905 law separating Church and State. However anti-clerical the then sitting administration of Émile Combes was, this was not a project that it had made a priority. The legislation originated rather with a special parliamentary commission, and the heavy lifting was done by the commission's rapporteur Aristide Briand.

Parliamentary supremacy did not mean that the executive branch was reduced to

nothing. It had some room to maneuver, for example, when it came to implementation of the law, and it enjoyed greater independence still where the organization of the military was concerned. Republicans imagined a citizens' army, based on universal conscription. In the 1870s, however, when the issue was decided, they had to deal with monarchists who wanted to preserve a standing military, led by career officers working in close collaboration with the executive, a prospect that unnerved Republicans who harbored fears of a potential *coup d'état*. The result was a compromise. Universal conscription became the law of the land, and the army was at the same time walled off from political life. It answered to the Minister of War, and its cadre of senior officers was named by the civilian administration. Yet otherwise it was left to itself, its distinctive internal culture — *la société militaire* — preserved and so too its autonomy in the formulation of military strategy. This produced an alarming circumstance in the opening months of the Great War when the Viviani administration, overwhelmed by the speed and violence of events, left it up to the army to take charge, which resulted in what Roussellier describes as a *de facto* military dictatorship.

It was in the heat of war then that the relationship between parliamentary and executive authority came in for a first major renegotiation. After the initial German onslaught was stanchied, civilian leaders began to take cognizance that the war was going to last and that victory would require the mobilization of the nation's full resources, a task for which army high command was not well suited. What then was to be done? The Prime Minister needed to know more about military affairs and to be in a position to coordinate policy with the army brass. In Clemenceau's celebrated phrase, war was just too important to left to the generals. Managing a war economy, moreover, required the creation of new ministries and better cooperation among those already in place. Not least of all, the whole administrative apparatus cried out for streamlining. The exigencies of the war moment sparked creation of a *de facto* war cabinet, the formation of interministerial committees, and a rationalizing drive along Taylorist lines.

And the Second World War just accelerated the process of executive strengthening that the First World War began. Nicolas Roussellier here zeroes in on the governing machinery of *La France Libre*, an apparatus that was headed after all by a career officer, Charles de Gaulle, who over the course of the conflict came to see himself, not just as a soldier, but also as a civilian leader. The tightening bond between the civil and the military, which the General effected and indeed embodied, was matched by greater executive leeway in the making of policy. De Gaulle made provision for the creation of a consultative assembly, but that's just the point: it was consultative. In policy areas that required immediate action, he did not hesitate to govern by ordonnance. In all these respects, *La France Libre* anticipated executive-driven governing practices that would later come full flowering under the Fifth Republic.

For Roussellier, war acted as the principal driver of change, but it was not the sole one. The Great Depression of the 1930s also created pressures on the executive to step up and play a greater role in steering an economy in distress. In 1935, the headquarters of the Prime Minister were relocated to the spacious Hôtel Matignon. The next year, Léon Blum took office, and he set about creating a Matignon-based *secrétariat général*, led by the able Jules Moch and staffed by a team of experts and

civil servants, that was intended to solidify the Prime Minister's control over policy-making. On the parliamentary front, it was Blum who set the timetable, bulldozing legislators to act and to legislate in a way that allowed the executive wide rule-making discretion in matters of implementation. Now, Blum's government fell when the Senate refused him *pleins pouvoirs* to deal with the fiscal crisis, but parliament was not so withholding toward Édouard Daladier, Prime Minister in the run-up to the Second World War. On the economic front, the legislative branch in effect abdicated to Daladier who was authorized to govern by decree law, which he proceeded to do by issuing a torrent of them, "*à jet continu*" in Roussellier's telling phrase. On the family front as well, Daladier turned out to be an institutional innovator. In 1939, he set up the *Haut comité de la Population*, which, not only helped to draft legislation, once upon a time parliament's prerogative, but did so in collaboration with representatives of family associations, with the help, that is, of civil society. Corporatist schemes to involve associations and trade unions in policy-making would become a yet more common feature of governance after the war. Think of how Jean Monnet configured the planning process or of how the *Sécurité sociale* was and still is managed.

That said, Roussellier is at pains to argue that de Gaulle's Fifth Republic represented not just one more step down the road to a stronger executive but a qualitative leap. The prerogatives that had accrued to the Matignon were transferred over to the Élysée, of course, but more than that: the President's power to dissolve parliament, in abeyance since Maréchal MacMahon's seizure of power in 1877, was now restored; he also had the authority to call referenda on issues of national significance, an authority de Gaulle deployed four times in his first years in office; and then there was the election of the President by the direct suffrage of the people, which conferred a special legitimacy on the occupant of the office vis-à-vis parliament. Power had become personal once again, and in the 1960s, when de Gaulle enjoyed the backing of solid majorities in parliament, there was little to stand in his way. Parliamentary democracy had become a thing of the past, replaced by something new: what Roussellier calls "*la démocratie exécutive*".

Roussellier's canvas is a big one, and it is inevitable, given the scale of his enterprise, that some issues are treated with less thoroughness than others. The media — print, radio, television — scarce get a mention, and yet television and knowing how to use it was one of de Gaulle's great strengths. The Third Republic left *la société militaire* to its own devices, and that society, so insular and conservative, dreamt dreams of greatness. It made a comeback under Vichy, and it struck once more during the Algerian War, this time targeting de Gaulle himself, leaving the reader to wonder how Vichy and the Algerian crisis shaped the process of executive strengthening. Roussellier's story trails off in the 1960s, but developments lay ahead that would reconstruct how executive power in the Fifth Republic operated. The regime's constitution provided for the creation of a new body, the *Conseil constitutionnel*. What would happen when the *Conseil* began to check the freewheeling ways of the President? And how would the executive branch function when the occupant of the Élysée confronted a hostile, rather than a well-disposed, majority in parliament, as happened for the first time but not the last in 1986? And then there is the question of the uniqueness of French experience. The executive branch has waxed strong everywhere. A dose, even a small one, of comparative history would have highlighted just what was special about how this process unfolded in France.

Yet, there should be no underestimating what Roussellier has accomplished. He has tracked across more than a century a major transformation in the nature of democracy. The process was consummated under the Fifth Republic, but it began earlier. The Third Republic in its waning decades does not enjoy such a positive reputation, and yet, as Roussellier shows, it was in these very years that the drive to bolster the executive branch took off. That drive was propelled by the need to deal with new kinds of challenges: how to manage the economy and how to interface with an organized civil society, but above all — and this is one of Roussellier’s major findings —, it was propelled by the exigencies of modern war-making. Roussellier has written an institutional history that is not just grand in sweep but that also has big claims to make.