

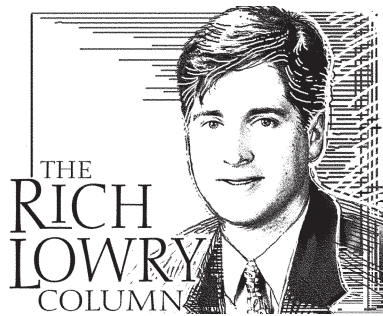
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THE RICH LOWRY COLUMN

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By Rich Lowry



The Anti-French revolt in France

“All my life,” Charles de Gaulle famously said, “I have had a certain idea of France.” This, though, was presumably not what he had in mind. France has been wracked by riots targeting public buildings and symbols of the nation, as well as ordinary commercial concerns.

Of course, France has a long tradition of unrest on the streets. If someone isn’t setting a car alight somewhere in the country in protest, you almost wonder what’s gone wrong. In 1968, President de Gaulle himself briefly fled Paris for fear that student protesters were going to topple the government, before finding his nerve.

So, it’s not unusual that things are getting wrecked and burned, but the disorder is portentous all the same. It started as demonstrations against underfunded schools and has morphed into a red-green campaign of mayhem ranging much more widely.

Palestinian flags and the slogan “Free Palestine” are ubiquitous. It’s not clear what either of these things has to do with burning down the elegant, 19th-century town hall building in Limoges or looting a Louis Vuitton store. But the Palestinian banner has become the equivalent of the North Vietnamese flag in the 1970s — a symbol of resistance to the West, and in this case, fierce opposition to Zionism and so-called settler-colonialism.

The flag also speaks to the immigrant component of the riots. France has done a poor job of assimilating immigrants and their children, a large portion of whom are Muslims from North Africa, thanks to France’s colonial history and, in particular, its incorporation of Algeria into France for a period of time (an insanely unrealistic project).

The problems that France has been creating for itself were foreseeable and, indeed, foreseen. As long ago as March 1959, de Gaulle is reported to have warned: “The Arabs are Arabs,

the French are French. Do you think that the French can absorb 10 million Muslims who will tomorrow be 20 million and after tomorrow 40?”

One way to look at these riots is as Frantz Fanon’s revenge. What the great mid-20th century theorist of anti-colonial resistance called “the wretched of the earth” are living in the downtrodden suburbs of Paris and, in effect, seeking to colonize the colonizers.

Make no mistake, though — white radicals, too, have taken a large hand in the disorder. Jean-Luc Melenchon, the leader of an ascendant left-wing party, has participated in the protests and condemned police for their supposedly brutish tactics. He celebrates the “creolization” of France and views immigrants and their children as part of a potential “bloc de rupture” that can revolutionize French politics and shift it radically to the left.

What’s ultimately in play is French identity. The country has traditionally had a universalizing mission (whether advancing Christianity or evangelizing for enlightenment values, depending on the regime) joined to a deep pride in the French nation. The rioters, who are illiberal and unpatriotic, aren’t much interested in either. Melenchon has said French identity cannot be “a tradition,” but is “a creation in permanent evolution.” And here, as has often happened in France’s history, it is evolving in the streets.

The unrest also serves as a warning that should the French public reject this left-wing vision and turn to the nationalist Marine Le Pen in next year’s election, the country will be made ungovernable. With the disorder spreading elsewhere, other Western European countries will also have to take note.

A key element of de Gaulle’s “certain idea of France” was its inherent greatness. His beloved France, though, is already a second-rank power. Its debt-to-GDP ratio is 120%, while much of the public apparently believes it is living under intolerable austerity and there is no political will to pull back on spending. An overmatched President Emmanuel Macron, presiding over a restive country, represents an exhausted center that has done much to bring the nation to this point.

Whatever France’s immediate future, greatness is not going to be part of the picture.

Rich Lowry is editor of the National Review.

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