

Module 05: 1968 — A Generation in Revolt?

Evidence 8: De Gaulle's Televised Speech to the Nation, May 30, 1968

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Introduction

Faced with a growing student revolt, the emergence of working-class strikes, and organized opposition from the powerful unions, De Gaulle issued a call, on May 24, 1968, for a national referendum. He hoped the election would serve as a vote of confidence for French leadership, himself included. In the face of rising Communist Party agitation within Parliament, and after the unions rejected an offer on May 27, De Gaulle gave a televised address to the nation, in which he rescinded his call for a referendum, dissolved the National Assembly, and asked citizens to oppose the threat of totalitarian dictatorship posed by the students and the French Communist Party. The address was followed by a large anti-Communist rally in central Paris. De Gaulle's speech marked a turning point, after which the threat of revolution quickly faded. Although the strikes continued well into June, they transformed from revolutionary insurrection into negotiated settlements over wages and benefits. The reinvigorated forces of law and order soon crushed all that remained of the student revolt.

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Men and women of France.

As the holder of the legitimacy of the nation and of the Republic, I have over the past 24 hours considered every eventuality, without exception, which would permit me to maintain that legitimacy. I have made my resolutions.

In the present circumstances, I will not step down. I have a mandate from the people, and I will fulfill it.

I will not change the Prime Minister, whose value, soundness and capacity merit the tribute of all. He will put before me any changes he may see fit to make in the composition of the government.

I am today dissolving the National Assembly.

I have offered the country a referendum which would give citizens the opportunity to vote for a far-reaching reform of our economy and of our university system and, at the same time, to pronounce on whether or not they retained their confidence in me, by the sole acceptable channel, that of democracy. I perceive that the present situation is a material obstacle to that process going ahead. For this reason, I am postponing the date of the referendum. As for the general elections, these will be held within the period provided for under the Constitution, unless there is an intention to gag the entire French people to prevent them from expressing their views as they are being prevented from carrying on their lives, by the same methods being used to prevent students from studying, teachers from teaching, workers from working. These means consist of intimidation, the intoxication and the tyranny exerted by groups long organized for this purpose and by a party that is a totalitarian undertaking, even if it already has rivals in this respect.

Should this situation of force be maintained, therefore, I will be obliged in order to maintain the Republic to adopt different methods, in accordance with the Constitution, other than an immediate vote by the country. In any event, civic action must now be organized, everywhere and at once. This must be done to aid the government first and foremost, and then locally to support the prefects, constituted or reconstituted as commissioners of the Republic, in their task of ensuring as far as possible the continued existence of the population and preventing subversion at any time and in any place.

France is threatened with dictatorship. There are those who would constrain her to abandon herself to a power that would establish itself in national despair, a power that would then obviously and essentially be the power of totalitarian communism. Naturally, its true colors would be concealed at first, making use of the ambition and hatred of sidelined politicians. After which, such figures would lose all but their own inherent influence, insignificant as that is.

No, I say! The Republic will not abdicate. The people will come to its senses. Progress, independence and peace will carry the day, along with freedom.

Vive la République !

Vive la France !