I knew Macron as a young man in a hurry. Now he is running out of road

The French president was always aware of the perils his country faced. Now, says his biographer, he can only hope his worst prophecies won't come true

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Emmanuel Macron and his wife Brigitte in 2017

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When I first met Emmanuel Macron in 2017, shortly after he became France's youngest head of state since Napoleon, it was hard not to be impressed by his intelligence and vigour and the ambitious vision he had — not just for his homeland but for all of Europe.

Only 39, he was clearly a young man in a hurry. He had captured the presidency in a decisive victory over Marine Le Pen, the hard-right leader of what was then still known as the National Front, despite having never before been elected to public office. I was intrigued by his remarkable ascendancy and wanted to chronicle his youthful presidency, which stood in refreshing contrast to the gerontocracy that rules the White House, Congress and the Supreme Court in my own country.

As we basked in the splendour of the Salon Doré at the Élysée Palace, Macron ticked off his plans to revitalise France and transform Europe. He vowed to shrink the bloated state sector that controlled much of the economy and unleash the innovative talents of French youth. He wanted to deepen the political and economic integration of the European Union in the wake of Brexit and prepare the continent to cope with challenges posed by a new age of great power rivalry pitting autocracies such as Russia and China against democracies led by America.

• France may be heading for an IMF bailout, warns minister

But a note of ominous caution always crept into our discussions. Macron warned repeatedly that if his radical reforms failed, it would pave the way for Le Pen or another right-wing demagogue to succeed him. He pointed to the rise of populist nationalism in many countries and said it could lead to the demise of the grand European experiment that has made war unthinkable between once implacable foes such as France and Germany and secured peace and prosperity on the continent for eight decades.

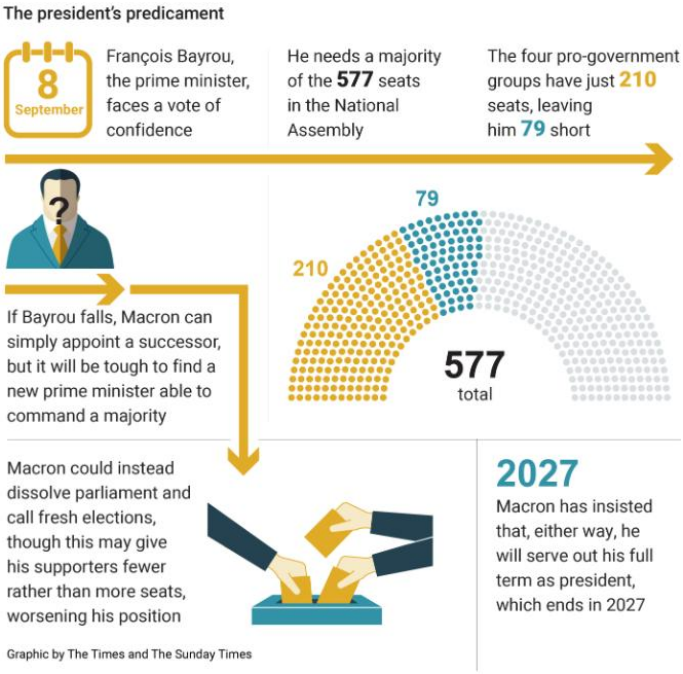
“Civilisations fail, and Europe can also fail, so our people need to be aware of the risks,” he told me.

More than eight years into Macron’s presidency, the alarm bells in France are ringing louder than ever. François Bayrou, the prime minister, declared last week that the country’s financial crisis had reached breaking point and demanded sharp budget cuts that his political opponents say are intolerable.

French prime minister Francois Bayrou

EPA/CHRISTOPHE PETIT TESSON

Bayrou insists the government needs to slash €44 billion (£38 billion) from its annual budget and scrap two national holidays to rectify its national finances. “We, France, all of us together, will not get out of this,” he declared. “We won’t get out of it as a state and as a society, because it’s our freedom that’s at stake. It’s our sovereignty and our independence.”



If Bayrou cannot persuade enough members of the National Assembly, the lower house of parliament, to support his austerity programme, and if he loses a confidence vote set for September 8, his government could collapse. If that happens, Macron will have three options: reappoint Bayrou, find another prime minister or hold new elections. None of those is compelling, especially the last: it was the president's calling of new elections last summer that led to a fractured parliament, substantial gains for Le Pen's party, now called National Rally, and a weak minority government.

Bayrou, a wily centrist politician with friends on both the right and the left, was selected by Macron in December to head France's third government in less than 12 months. But like his predecessors, he has proved incapable of gaining sufficient support for the economic sacrifices that France requires to regain financial growth and stability.

Barricades burnt in Paris in 2018 as discontent found a voice in protests about fuel taxes

AP:ASSOCIATED PRESS

Even though Macron's early reforms brought unemployment down to about 7 per cent — the lowest in two decades — the efforts by successive governments to rein in deficits and curtail costly social benefits have run into a brick wall of public resistance.

France enjoys some of the most lavish perquisites among western democracies, including six weeks of paid annual vacations, universal healthcare and nearly free public education from primary school to university. The French people are ranked among those with the world's healthiest and longest life spans. They can retire at the age of 64, three years earlier than most other European populations, and want Macron to restore the previous retirement age of 62.

Even the slightest tweak in benefits can provoke howls of protest, despite the obvious need to control costs so that popular social programmes can be sustained for the next generation. Indeed, pervasive discontent and violent protests over government policies are almost seen as a national birthright. As the French writer and adventurer Sylvain Tesson puts it: "France is a paradise inhabited by people who think they are living in hell."

Over the course of two years, Macron and I engaged in several conversations about his travails in learning how to govern his stubborn and prickly compatriots. He had studied the life of Charles de Gaulle, who often complained about the difficulty of ruling a nation with 246 kinds of cheese. Nonetheless, Macron was dumbfounded when the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vest) protests erupted in November 2018 over a small rise in the tax on diesel that was intended to curtail air pollution. (The movement took its name from the brightly coloured safety vests that French drivers must keep in their cars.)

He then tried to atone for his political deafness by embarking on a nationwide series of town hall meetings that lasted as long as seven hours, in which French citizens vented their grievances and hurled insults at their president. Macron shrugged off the abuse. In response to being hanged in effigy at several protest sites, he remarked that it was typical for his compatriots to yearn for strong leadership while at the same time calling for their presidents to be decapitated.

Macron acknowledged that his lack of political experience might have contributed to his early stumbles and that his impatience in bringing about change was too often perceived as arrogance. On the day of his inauguration in 2017, as his jubilant staff clinked glasses of champagne in the Élysée Palace, Macron, contemplating the enormousness of the tasks before him, did not share in the celebratory mood. He knew he would need to work quickly to capitalise on his stunning victory before his majority in the National Assembly dissipated. "There's no time to lose," he told his closest aides. "The work begins tonight."

Besides his struggle to persuade the French people to embrace his economic reforms, Macron also encountered wariness and mistrust in pushing for bold change in Europe. As soon as he took office, he flew off to Berlin, seeking to build a close rapport with Germany's chancellor at the time, Angela Merkel. Knowing that progress was possible only if their two countries acted in tandem, he proclaimed he would be his country's most pro-Europe president and hoped he and Merkel could nurture the kind of warm bonds that had linked François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl several decades earlier.

But Merkel was reluctant to embrace Macron's agenda of dramatic change, and her innate sense of caution clashed with his impetuous style. Having grown up on the other side of the Berlin Wall, she was also less imbued with a Europeanist mindset than Kohl or her other predecessors.

With Angela Merkel, the former German chancellor, in 2017. She was reluctant to embrace Macron's agenda for change

AFP OR LICENSORS

Early in his first term, Macron made a speech at the Sorbonne in which he laid out his vision of how a more dynamic Europe could play a more powerful role on the world stage. With Donald Trump in the White House, Macron believed it vital for Europe to control its own destiny and achieve strategic sovereignty to defend its own interests in a new age of great power rivalry.

France is the continent's leading military power, with an independent arsenal of 300 nuclear weapons, and Macron confided that he was prepared to break with tradition and extend the country's nuclear deterrent to cover Germany and other European partners. But Merkel and other European leaders refused to accept his offer, fearing the loss of the US security umbrella.

When Joe Biden defeated Trump in 2020, they all breathed a sigh of relief. At his first meeting with allied leaders as president, Biden proudly proclaimed that "America is back". To which Macron replied: "Yes, but for how long?"

The return of Trump to the White House has vindicated Macron's prescient analysis of Europe's predicament. Many European leaders now regret the fact it took them so long to accept it. As a result, Europe is scrambling to build up its military capacity to confront Russia's continuing onslaught in Ukraine and prepare for the day when America no longer has its back. Even Germany, long a bastion of pacifist sentiment, is ramping up its defence industry and pleading for upgraded military co-operation with France and other partners.

During President Trump's first term, Macron warned that Europe must be able to control its own destiny

REUTERS

Since last year's disastrous parliamentary election, Macron has largely left domestic matters in the hands of his prime minister. He has instead focused his energies on foreign and security matters, establishing a close relationship with Volodymyr Zelensky, his Ukrainian counterpart, and pushing fellow European leaders to join France in recognising a Palestinian state.

He and his wife, Brigitte, have also pressed legal charges against Candace Owens, the far right propagandist, over her outlandish claims that the First Lady was actually a born a man. As in previous years, he has spent most of August working from his summer residence of Fort de Brégançon, a medieval fortress on an island off the French Riviera.

Yet with just under two years left in the Elysée Palace, Macron can find little consolation in having been proved right in his diagnosis of what ails his country and the continent. What bothers him most is that he was unable to convince the French public and his fellow European leaders to act on the urgency of his policy prescriptions, like a modern-day Cassandra. He seems condemned to serve out his remaining time in office hoping the most disastrous consequences of his accurate prophecies do not come to pass.

William Drozdiak, a former foreign editor and chief European correspondent for the Washington Post, is the author of The Last President of Europe: Emmanuel Macron's Race to Revive France and Save the World