

THE TIME OF STORMS

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English Sample

Introduction

Storms have always fascinated me. As a child, I was hypnotized by lightning, by the violence of the wind, by the unleashing of the natural elements, by the astonishing height of the waves that broke on the fine sandy beaches of the Atlantic coast where I spent my vacations. I feared them. I was afraid of them. And yet, they attracted me like a magnet. I did not want to miss any of these confusing sequences. Sometimes I would stay motionless for hours on the rocks near Royan to better enjoy the spectacle of unbridled nature. Deep down, I liked what I feared. Sometimes, with my nose stuck to the ice, I observed the movement of the elements intensely. I would not have left my cozy observation post for anything in the world, nor would I have even considered abandoning it. Come to think of it, I think it is the story of my life. So many times, I have searched for and dreaded the adrenaline rush that comes with every crisis. As a child, I was content to wait and endure the vagaries of the weather as well as the monotony of daily life. I waited desperately for an event to occur to deceive the boredom, which only prospect froze me. As a young person, and even more so as an adult, I did everything I could to flee the calm times and become an actor in these crises that I was hoping and praying for while secretly fearing them... Finally, with the passage of time and the passing of age, I must admit that I love storms, and not just in the climatic sense. I have often searched for them, hoped for them, dreamt of them. They are in my nature and constitute my identity. Perhaps it is this atavism that convinced me that this would be the most direct path to finally becoming legitimate in the eyes of others. From a very young age, I had already thought that if the situation became inextricable, dangerous, extreme, my place would no longer be contested! This instinctive feeling only grew stronger as the years went by, first because I understood that there would be less competition to face since many ambitious people are known for evaporating at the first gust of wind, and second because it was only in the difficulty that I believed I could truly fulfill myself. Very early on, I was convinced that calm times would never be for me, that I would be less successful than others in them, or, at least, that I would not be able to stand out. Where does this feeling of illegitimacy come from? I cannot say. There must be many causes. I should not venture to find them. I would not be able to step back and, moreover, I'm not even sure that there is a rational explanation. The important thing is that little by little, this feeling has grown stronger and is now deeply rooted in me. But strangely enough, instead of pushing me to retreat, to erase, it has, on the contrary, drawn me towards the summits and the most delicate situations. Since no one was ready to do this work, I volunteered, precisely because there were no others. I was not sure I would succeed, but at least I was sure that this way I would have a role to play, a

place to hold, and that I would be seen in action. I would be judged on the facts. The cards would be dealt again. I would have my chance. I wasn't even thinking about the possibility of failure, even less about the risk of being ridiculed, but about coming out of anonymity, out of the depressing status of being a spectator of a life unfolding without me taking an active part in it. This is how I developed my taste for storms and my conviction that they would be my natural terrain, my almost daily lot. Far from dreading them, I hoped for them, imagined them, idealized them. This inclination has only grown stronger over the years. It has even become the guiding thread of my political career. As a result, I always tried to make myself indispensable wherever I was. What better way to do this than through a situation that seems so inextricable that no one thinks of getting into it? Thus, as a young parliamentarian and anonymous member of the leadership of my political family, I was always the first one to want to go to the front in a tricky political event or on a disappointing, even catastrophic election night. Far from tiring, I ended up enjoying those moments of solitude where everything could be played out in no time at all, where decisions had to be taken in the spur of the moment, where instinct was as important as reflection. Time did not count any more, since we didn't have any time. Very early on, I felt this truth: it is in the heart of the cyclone that one feels most alive, it is on the edge of the precipice that one most appreciates the simple joys of life. I dreamt of a life filled with fury while at the same time aspiring to the tranquility of a serene and stable family home. I tried to draw from these contradictions and paradoxes an energy that I wanted or believed to be inexhaustible. In fact, I never missed it. It was often my best ally and at the same time my lifeline.

From this point of view at least, life has not got me down! When I look in retrospect, I find illustrations of this reality, this mixture within me of fear and desire for storms. It is an understatement to say that the five years I spent at the Élysée have provided me with inexhaustible material. I was served far beyond my expectations.

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2007 G8

At the very beginning of June, I went to Heiligendamm, a beautiful beach on the Baltic coast in northeastern Germany. Angela Merkel was the hostess of the event as her country held the presidency of the G8. It was my first international summit. I was looking forward to attending and getting to know some of my key international contacts. The organization was perfect, as always in Germany. The facilities were comfortable and professional, without any unnecessary

luxuries. There was everything you needed and nothing more. I enjoyed the place, but I did not think I would necessarily want to come back one day on vacation. Whatever the beauty of this sea, it suffered, in my eyes, from the comparison with the Mediterranean. We each had a small house where we could stay with our wives and main employees. Cecilia had accompanied me since it was protocol. She was elegant and made sure not to crack a smile before announcing to me, in the middle of the summit, that she could not stay by my side for the two and a half days of the meeting because she had to return to Paris as soon as possible to celebrate her daughter's birthday. She had attended the opening dinner. She did not want to do any more. I hid my annoyance and let it go like that. What else could I do?

George W. Bush had arrived last, and we had agreed that I would visit him in the pavilion reserved for the American delegation. Since my election, I had only had him on the phone once. I was happy to be able to discuss with him the new relationship I wanted to build between the United States and France, after the years of battle and barely concealed mistrust of the Chirac era. An hour before I left the place where I was staying to join George W. Bush, the American protocol informed us that the President had just had a vagal discomfort, so he could not receive me. I was a little surprised. I stayed in the house that had been assigned to us, getting lost in various guesses. Barely thirty minutes had passed when we received another call from Team Bush. "The president absolutely wants to keep the appointment with the French president, but he warns him that he will be in bed, and he wants to apologize for that beforehand!" I immediately let it be known that, under these conditions, I preferred that the President rest and that I did not want, under any circumstances, to disturb him, let alone be indiscreet. The answer was not long in coming. "Come. It is important that the two presidents talk to each other." I walked - the distance was only a few hundred meters - to the American pavilion. I entered the hall and discovered a striking scene. George W. Bush was lying on a couch, a pillow had been placed under his head. He was white as a sheet. He greeted me with a gentle smile, making a gesture to get up. I rushed to dissuade him. His wife, Laura, was at his side, smiling and slightly worried. Condoleezza Rice was there too. Warm, energetic, affable, she was the one who welcomed me: "This is not reasonable, but the President really wanted to see you. He is counting on you, and he wants to create the conditions of great trust between our two countries." The situation was somewhat surreal. No one ever knew anything about this malaise. Out of discretion, I had not even told the members of the French delegation who were not present. George W. Bush, due to fatigue, stress, or jet lag, had fainted on arrival, momentarily and not seriously. As our conversation progressed, which lasted no less than an hour, I could see the physical condition of my interlocutor improving visibly. His face was regaining its color. He

even ended up sitting down. George W. Bush, who believes in the rightness of what he does, is a passionate person. One of the things he wanted to ensure was that France would stand by the United States in Afghanistan. He had come to forget his physical worries of the moment. I was absolutely fascinated by the trust and depth of the relationship he had with his Secretary of State. I had never seen such complicity. Bush told me about Condoleezza: " She is like my daughter. Everything she says is exactly what I think." She could, during the conversation, interrupt him, clarify a point that had remained obscure to her, or even go further than her boss on this or that question. She was never lacking in candor and respectful attitude towards the President. There was a great deal of dignity in seeing this elegant university professor carry the word of the President of the United States so well. As I walked away, I thought how fortunate he was to have such quiet strength at his side. Whatever Bernard Kouchner's brilliance, and his real capacity for empathy, he wasn't the same at all! The public image of George W. Bush is the opposite of the man I knew, with whom I worked in confidence. First of all, he is very cultivated. He often surprised me by telling me about Camus, who he had read, and who had marked him. He is frank and direct. One day when we were having lunch at the Élysée Palace, Carla offered him a beer. He replied: " Unfortunately, that's absolutely forbidden to me. For years I was a heavy drinker. I don't drink anymore because, at the slightest hitch, I can fall back into it! " Being disarmingly frank is no doubt usual among Americans, but Bush practiced it without ostentation, simply, without affectation. He deeply loves his country, his family, his convictions. He is American to the tips of his fingernails; nothing pleases him more than the food of his country. He is courageous, attaching very little importance to his image or to what the press might say about him. Finally, he keeps his word and remains faithful to his allies as well as to his friends. His leadership is unquestionable. He was, in my view, the President of the United States who believed most in the universality of American values. It was very different with his successors. Obama was concerned about the image he wanted to give in the present and in posterity. As for President Trump, it is not a trial of intent to assert that he is exclusively concerned about his interests and the "deals" that he can implement. The convictions he occasionally professes are so changeable, and depending on the circumstances, that it would be hard to try to make them, even seemingly, coherent. I do not omit, of course, the grave error that was the American intervention in Iraq, and the inaccurate information that was communicated to America's allies. This will remain a stain on George W. Bush's record and actions. Jacques Chirac had the courage and wisdom not to follow him. Nonetheless, I enjoyed working with him for a year. I appreciate the fact that even today, we have remained in contact. I would like to add that it is no small thing in a family that father and son managed

to become presidents of the world's leading power, thus creating a new dynasty in American society. The United States has, in fact, monarchical traits that are often underestimated.

With this G8, I was learning about top-level international relations. It was new for me. I entered the large meeting room trying to immerse myself in everything. There were eight of us around the large circular table. I was sitting between Vladimir Putin, whom I was seeing for the first time, and Angela Merkel, who had thoughtfully placed me on her left, reserving her right for George W. Bush. Opposite me was Tony Blair, whose last summit it was, and Romano Prodi representing Italy. For me, the latter was truly unfathomable. What a curious contrast: the quietest and darkest President of the Council imaginable, in charge of representing the happiest and warmest country in Europe!

On this occasion, I met Tony Blair again with great pleasure. I have rarely met someone as talented, brilliant, friendly as the then head of the British government. We got along very well. I had difficulty imagining him as the leader of the Labour Party, so much so, on many subjects, he happened to be on my right, and even quite noticeably so. As I listened to him, I thought of our French socialists. What could be the relation between François Hollande, who was going to promise a taxation on companies and Tony Blair, who was constantly fascinated by the future, the new technologies, and the spirit of enterprise? The contrast was striking and, in my eyes, not in favor of the French socialists. Between each one of us, the German presidency had put small plates of chocolates at our disposal. I remember that Vladimir Putin liked them as much as I did. We extended our arms almost compulsively to grab a piece of them throughout the endless sessions on the agenda, which were, moreover, of unequal interest. By the time I wanted to get a refill, I had not realized that there was only one left. But it was precisely the one Putin was aiming at. Then there was a funny situation where we both hung our hands above the plate. The others had watched the situation. Putin and I had not yet said a word to each other. We stared at each other, wondering who was going to give up to the other. Then, suddenly, we burst out laughing and agreed that there could be no loser! We agreed to leave the last piece of chocolate alone and wisely pushed the plate away. Putin was laughing a lot. The ice was broken. During the summit, we had a first bilateral meeting. It was important that things started well between us. I was walking on eggshells because I knew how close he and Jacques Chirac were. I was afraid that, given my relationship with him, some bad messages might have been passed on. I would add that the trial that was often made against me in the media about my supposed American tropism forced me to make visible efforts to put my interlocutor in confidence. In fact, things went better than I could have imagined, especially after I was able to explain to him that my conviction was solidly anchored: I did not want to hear about a European coalition

against Russia. It was clear to me that Europe needed Russia, at least as much as the other way around. I never deviated from this line, the only one compatible with our common history. Vladimir Putin's voice does not correspond to his character. It is soft, flat, without any strength or charm. I have always been surprised by this contrast. Every time I met the Russian President, who has in every way a charismatic, authoritarian, and strong personality, I remarked on it. However, he is easy to talk to. He is a good listener, extremely courteous, friendly and even quite willing to smile and laugh. He is extremely loyal to his friends as well as to his convictions but can change his position if he is convinced. However, he is very suspicious of everyone and everything. Gaining his trust is the most important thing, probably the most difficult, but once you have gained it, he becomes a completely different man who has only one word and who respects it. One thing he hates most of all is double talk, especially with the press. In other words, being nice to him during a one-on-one meeting and letting himself be criticized outside is not the attitude to have. Taking him by force is not the best way to get anything either. He is willing to accept disagreements and never holds it against you. He fully understands that you have a red line that you will refuse to cross as long as the other side is true and that you accept that he too will express the nature of the limits he will not cross. Above all, he is wary of words that fly away and promises that remain untrue. The only things that matter to him are the actions he never forgets, for better or for worse, especially when he feels betrayed. In the course of 2010, he phoned me to pass on a message that his diplomatic adviser had previously pointed out to us as very important: " Nicolas, I have a favor to ask of you. It is important to me, because it concerns the Russian Orthodox Church. You know that even during the Communist era, it held. If we have recovered so quickly after eighty years of communism, it is because the Orthodox Church, even at the worst of times, has been the backbone of the Russian people. This is a major challenge for me. Now, there is a piece of land in the heart of Paris that belongs to the French state (it is the one where the headquarters of Météo-France was located, just across the Alma bridge). I am asking you to give it to Russia, we will pay the right price, and to allow us to build an Orthodox church and a cultural center on it. » I accepted immediately, without further discussion. Putin had, moreover, assured me that he would take the best architects to make it one of the most beautiful monuments of Paris. That is what he did, with brilliance. That was our culture. It was our roots, and it was a magnificent symbol of the friendship between our two peoples. I had so often evoked the Christian roots of France. I could not refuse Putin to promote those of Russia. Finally, the Météo-France building was certainly one of the ugliest in Paris. There was a certain amount of polemics, in my view, because of a misguided conception of secularism as an instrument of religious struggle. I did not give in, even explaining that the

few hundred mosques that had been opened in recent years had not provoked any opposition. I did not see how this Orthodox church, and the cultural center that would be attached to it, would in any way hinder the French Republic. There were some difficulties with the mayor of Paris, who was rather uncomfortable with this initiative. I was never able to disentangle whether the most embarrassing thing for him was religion, Putin or Russia. We were two years late, but the essential was saved. The church had seen the light of day. As for me, I had gained the trust of the Russian president.

Another major participant at the Summit was Tony Blair. He was, contrary to his usual mood, dark and a little off. The internal battle was raging with his former friend, Gordon Brown, then Chancellor of the Exchequer. The latter had won. Tony Blair, after ten years at Downing Street, had to fade away. It was not easy because he didn't feel worn out, physically or mentally. He was passionate and he would have gladly continued. We had talked about it until late at night on the second day of the summit. Then an idea came to me. Since there would be a new post of President of the European Council with the future simplified treaty, why not make him the first one? I must admit that Tony was tempted but he did not hide from me that he did not believe in his chances. What followed showed that he was right, and that I was wrong. Yet, I was stubborn. I thought he had the brilliance and experience to pilot a group of twenty-seven European countries. He was a Labour Party member but also a liberal, so he could bring together the European political chessboard and, above all, he was English. It was a golden opportunity to attach the Big Island to the Continent! I was, at that time, far from imagining the risk of Brexit. But, with hindsight, who could deny that an Englishman as first president of the European Council would have been a useful symbol for the future to show the most recalcitrant Britons the importance that Europe attached to their presence? I was sure it was the right strategy. However, I was quickly disillusioned, especially after talking to Angela Merkel about it. I could not have anticipated her reservations, because she sincerely appreciated Tony Blair, whom she spoke of as a friend. But from there to leaving the European Council to him, there was a step she was obviously not ready to take. She confided to me: " I love Tony very much, but we must be careful that the future president is not too strong and does not have the temptation to put us under guardianship. That would change all the balances in Europe. So we must not be in a hurry. Let us wait and see how things develop. » I did not understand it right away. I lacked European experience and practice. I later learned that when you want to bury an initiative in Europe, you just have to say with authority that you want time to think about it! In fact, you do not give it much thought, and above all, you don't do anything about it. But the

anecdote about Tony Blair is revealing of the state of mind of the most European of the continent. In the eyes of most of them, it is advisable every time, and at all costs, to choose a personality compatible with everyone and incapable of overshadowing anyone. The strategy is always the same. It consists in selecting honorable temperaments, preferably without charisma, from the smallest members of the Union, so that they will never have the crazy idea of one day wanting to rely on the strength of their homeland of origin.

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I was quite disappointed by the formal side of the discussions which carefully avoided major difficulties, for fear of the slightest blockage, and by the weakness of the statements reporting the decisions supposedly taken. The texts were, in general, of a length proportional to the harmlessness of what had been said. It was quite long, too formal, too stodgy, and, above all, the composition of the G8 no longer made much sense as the world had changed so much. My colleagues at the time had understood this but had not drawn all the consequences. In fact, we had had, with eight countries, two days full of work, but the honor was safe since in its " great generosity " the rotating presidency of the G8 had invited, for the morning of the third day and lunch, the G5. Thus, China, India, South Africa, Mexico, and Brazil were asked to join the G8 for a catch-up session. Representatives of more than three billion people had to travel across part of the planet to speak for a few minutes at the end of the meeting of the " great nations". I immediately sensed the incongruity of the situation, its most shocking aspect, and the inability under these conditions to manage the great affairs of the world. I waited until the end of the summit to say firmly my way of thinking. I had not yet had the idea of the G20 in mind, but I was determined to make a major change in our discussion format.

A curious incident closed my first G8. Bilateral talks had multiplied. I was a good hour late for the press conference at the end of the summit. I got there by running and had to climb four to four the two stairs leading to the press room. I arrived breathless and tired after three days of intense international contacts. From this insignificant fact came a rumor that I had arrived drunk at this meeting. The news was even reported in the Belgian 8 p.m. newspaper, which wondered about the nature of the drinks I had been drinking! The social networks reaped the rewards of carefully selected images. I appeared there, it must be said, physically quite strange. The editing was so well done that I myself could have been abused. The problem is that in my whole life I never drank a drop of alcohol or even dipped my lips in a glass of wine. Neither in Heiligendamm nor anywhere else. I do not drink. Everybody knew that. It was even common

knowledge. Nevertheless, for the next three months I had to justify myself constantly. To this day I still come across people who talk to me with a sly smile about my alcoholic excesses from Heiligendamm! They are generally people whose complexion leaves no doubt as to their own attachment to the bottle.

More seriously, the G8 ended with a *minimal* agreement. We ended up by extorting the consent of the American president on the recognition of the responsibility, at least partial, of mankind for climate change. This seems obvious today, but thirteen years ago it was a completely different situation. When we know the reality of Donald Trump's positions on the subject, it is easy to see that George W. Bush was a reasonable conservative. In any case, we've seen much worse since then! Of course, he did not commit himself to the CO₂ reduction targets that we and Angela Merkel wanted the G8 to adopt, but at least he agreed on the necessity of this reduction, and on the impossibility of fighting climate change by technical progress alone. The traditional American position of total confidence in science and its discoveries to solve environmental problems was for the first time shaken.

Meeting with Obama in 2008

This summer 2008 turned out to be very rich in international events! On Friday, July 25, the French press was very agitated, because I received at the Élysée Palace a young American senator from Illinois who was the Democratic candidate for the presidency of the United States of America, in the person of Barack Obama. I had never seen such a phenomenon before. The journalists were captivated, enamored, fascinated. Every word he said elicited a concert of approval and praise. He was as popular as Bush was unpopular. Every journalist wanted to be part of the event. The specialists of the United States and international affairs of course, but everyone else too. It was a tornado of love and blind support falling on the shoulders of Barack Obama. I was happy for him and a little concerned for the media, who had lost all sense of proportion, as if their heads had been turned. What had Barack Obama done to create such a frenzy? He was not yet elected and therefore had no record. But he was charismatic, handsome, and well spoken. Within a few months he had become the darling of the international media. Many of those who hated Bush's America could once again say that they loved America because it was Obama's America. It was very simplistic to reduce a country of three hundred and thirty million people to one person, but that was the way it was. I already knew Barack Obama, I had met him during my trip to the United States in 2006. I had asked to meet him after seeing on

television an excellent speech by this young senator at the 2004 Democratic Convention. He received me in Washington, D.C., in his Senate office for a good hour. We sympathized and even planned to travel together to Africa. He asked me about my presidential ambitions. I confirmed them to him and asked him the same question in return. He answered: " I will not be a candidate, because it is probably too early". Things had changed a lot since then, because not only was he a candidate, but everyone saw him elected even before the election. Poor John McCain, though a man of quality, could not compete. Barack Obama's European tour was a triumph. He had wanted to stop in Paris and hold a joint press conference with me at the Elysée Palace. I was delighted to meet my American interlocutor again. He was a man without any arrogance, without any desire to dominate the other, without any ulterior motives. It was easy to work with him, and easy to maintain a sustained dialogue. I found him frank, straightforward, and devoid of the usual little perversities of political life. I liked it when he smiled broadly or even laughed. You could have imagined yourself on the benches of an American university, talking with one of your most brilliant fellow students. He had a sense of humor and liked to joke around. One day when we were at the White House, with no less than a dozen or so collaborators around us, he opened the meeting by saying: " Before we begin, I want to share with you a historical document on which I want to gather the comments of the French president." I had no idea what it was all about. He took out a large brown envelope with a picture of me, a 20-year-old student with long hair and a pair of jeans in fashion at the time. Barack continued: " Could you tell me where you bought this pair of jeans? » We all burst out laughing. When my son Jean had his first child, he called me around midnight, while Carla and I were at home: " Nicolas, I want to congratulate you, you must be very happy. Michelle and I are happy for you. But tell me, how does it feel for Carla to sleep with a granddaddy? " he ended laughing. I replied in the same tone: " Don't worry, it's going to happen to you soon with your two daughters!" Our reports were very unprotocolized. Moreover, I was delighted by his popularity, which curiously but strongly brought back the United States. My alleged pro-Americanism became more difficult to challenge. And the left was very embarrassed to protest my willingness to return to the integrated military command of NATO. It was much easier for the media to work with Obama than with Bush. The French left wanted to make him one of its own. The truth was that he happened to be on my right on many issues. For example, during his campaign, he had maintained a vague position on the abortion issue. His religious commitment was very American and therefore quite profound. He strongly believed in economic liberalism and in the effectiveness of tax cuts. However, there was a big change with the Bush era: he wanted to get involved in the issue of climate change, which gave us hope that

the United States would finally stop blocking major international decisions on the subject. In fact, what was most impressive about him was what he revealed about American pragmatism. America was still a country where, in the depths of the South, until the 1980s, you could still read at the entrance of some restaurants: "Colored people not welcome", and where, less than thirty years later, was about to vote for a black president for the first time in its history ! It was fascinating, dizzying, and filled with hope all those in the world who had suffered from racism. The only reservation that I quickly perceived was that Barack Obama was getting used to this adulation. He loved to be loved. On the other hand, he hated to take the risk of breaking this consensual image, and consequently he would quickly refrain from taking the risk of cracking it. It was probably inevitable. When you receive the Nobel Peace Prize just eight months after your election, without any factual reason, it cannot remain without consequences. Who could blame it? At the press conference, the first question I was asked by a French journalist was if, when I was now standing next to Barack Obama, I regretted talking four years ago about "cleaning the streets with Kärcher"? What did that have to do with anything? Because there were black people in our suburbs and that the future American president himself was black? It was a little sad, but at the same time so revealing of the evolution of a noble and constantly pulled down profession.

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