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"Le Grand" – survives to retirement

By Keith Spicer

PARIS. Tall, tanned, impulsive and wildly charming, he dives into your eyes, leans close, touches you, maybe puts an arm around you. If you're a woman, he'll kiss your hand. After watching him twist and turn and play Houdini for 40 years, the French are going to miss him. A week ago Jacques Chirac confirmed an open secret: at 74, and after 12 chaotic years as President of France, he won't run for a third term.

Political enemies, even bitter ex-friends, dismiss him as a do-nothing president. They call him a flip-flop artist, a power-monger obsessed with office, not accomplishment. A chameleon with principles for (electoral) sale. A liar, a thief. But such opinions almost define his trade. Weighing faults against contributions, Chirac's record isn't bad.

Not counting betrayals of allies (a sign of toughness and imagination here), Chirac's errors were legion. Running for president while mayor of Paris, he dragged scandals behind him like a string of tin cans: fake jobs for party workers, kickbacks on building high schools, outrageous personal expenses, free holiday travel, vote-rigging, suitcases full of cash. Somehow investigating judges got intimidated then squeezed out, trial deadlines expired, mouths shut, and a damning video died with its author. In theory, prosecutors could demand jail – but a new president's pardon will likely spare Chirac.

Weeks after becoming president in 1995, Chirac enraged the world by testing new French A-bombs in the south Pacific. Other missteps? In 1997 he dissolved Parliament to get a bigger mandate, but instead had to "cohabit" for five years with a Socialist parliamentary majority. In May 2005 he held an unnecessary referendum asking approval of a new European constitution. Leftists and nationalists defeated it, and both Europe and France lost influence. Irony: Chirac harped on Europe's becoming an independent political and military force in a "multipolar" world. His referendum crippled this potential. So did his frequent blaming of "Brussels" (European Union capital) for domestic issues he couldn't solve.

A 1995 election promise to heal the rich-poor "social fracture" remained a dead letter – remember the car-burning November 1995 ghetto riots? Then Chirac wasted prodigious efforts trying to deny the presidency to his turncoat-protégé Nicolas Sarkozy. He dabbled in class-war sloganeering, becoming a "leftist monarch." His nepotism at Airbus helped cause multi-billion-dollar setbacks.

Against all this, Chirac's achievements shine bright. If character is destiny, his peccadilloes were only money and (for a longer column) women. On great moral issues, his instincts were decent and brave.

His defining stands defended peoples either France had hurt or the world had abandoned. Foremost were French Jews. De Gaulle and his successors had claimed France shared no guilt in the infamous 1942 Nazi-ordered round-up of Jews for deportation and murder. Chirac, evoking tears of shame on the round-up's very site, blamed Frenchmen, the French State and its enthusiastic police for the "irreparable." In 2001, he apologized to the Harkis – Algerian colonials who fought for France against their own nationalists. De Gaulle, after a 1962 peace agreement, had thanked these French compatriots by abandoning them in Algeria to torture and death as collaborators.

In 2006 Chirac saw the award-winning film *Les Indigènes* highlighting the crucial role Arab and African troops played in the French Army in 1944-45 – a well-known, but officially soft-pedalled, fact. Chirac promised fairer pensions for the colonial soldiers short-changed by De Gaulle. He also supported declarations deploring France's earlier slave trade and colonial misdeeds.

During the 1990s Bosnian war, Chirac stirred a cowardly West to resist Serb aggression. He kept a steady course between friendship with Israel and sympathy for Palestinians. He deepened historic links with Germany and Russia -- their dramatic trio against the 2003 Anglo-American invasion of Iraq enraging George W. Bush. In Chirac's farewell speech last March 11 he urged vigilance against racism and extremism.

Through it all, Chirac kept France's relations with former African client-states cosy, though often personally compromising with evil men. Through frequent trade-and-culture visits he developed intimate relations with Japan and China. On his three domestic priorities -- fighting traffic deaths, cancer and neglect of the handicapped -- he achieved solid success.

Chirac, like all statesmen, seethes with contradictions. He favours industry, but fights pollution. He praises entrepreneurs, but denounces free enterprise as "an evil akin to communism." With "one hand on his heart and the other on a cow's ass," he pretends he's a bumpkin. But he speaks decent English and Russian. And he's an expert on Asian, African and aboriginal cultures: his legacy includes the grand new Musée du Quai Branly.

I had the luck of meeting Chirac four times, twice for brief conversations. He knew plenty about Canada, and praised his birds-of-a-feather pal Jean Chrétien. OK, I was a charm-victim: he put his arm around me both times.