

France's presidential election

**Elysée**

Sarkozy quits the stage

# Adieu, Nicolas

A political obituary of a one-term president

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BY S.P. | PARIS



SO NICOLAS SARKOZY is definitively retiring from political life. That, at least, is what he told his campaign team at the Elysée Palace yesterday. My sense is that no politician is ever truly finished in France (just look at the names being cited for ministerial jobs under President François Hollande). But assuming he means it, what will the history books say about him?

As I said briefly in a [piece](#) for this week's issue, it is in many ways extraordinary that Mr Sarkozy has come to such an end, making history as only the second president, after Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, to fail to win a re-election bid. Not that he failed to accept defeat gracefully. He made a dignified, if strained, [speech](#) on Sunday evening, calling on Mr Hollande to be “respected”, and wishing him luck.

But the phrase that keeps coming to my mind after Mr Sarkozy's defeat is: what a

waste. He has become such an object of hate during this campaign that the French seem to have forgotten why they ever elected him.

Yet this was a man who had so much going for him in 2007. He was swept to office with 53% of the vote, more than Mr Hollande achieved on Sunday. After 12 torpid years under Jacques Chirac, he brought a breath of fresh air and (relative) youthfulness to the job. He was in many ways profoundly anti-conservative, and all the more appealing because of it.

With his unusual surname and immigrant origins, he also had something of the outsider about him—even though he was brought up in posh Neuilly, the suburb of Paris where he first became mayor.

He didn't talk like other politicians. He hadn't been groomed at ENA to speak in incomprehensible code, which the French call *la langue de bois*. He said things that the rest of the clubby political class didn't dare to: that the French should work more, or stop blaming America for everything, or promote members of ethnic minorities to proper jobs, not just put them in charge of music and sport.

In office he was energetic, hard-working and bold. A whirlwind in perpetual motion, some of his reforms—notably giving universities autonomy, raising the retirement age, cutting red tape for entrepreneurs, rationalising the regional network of courts—have been solid. His international record, despite some erratic moments, has kept France's voice heard on the world stage. Nor can he alone be blamed for the jump in unemployment and debt on his watch as the financial crisis struck.

The tragedy of the Sarkozy presidency, however, is that he seems in the end to have been his own worst enemy. He fired off in so many directions that it left the French confused, dizzy and exhausted. He seemed unable to channel his energy in a consistent direction. Utterly convinced by everything he did, he then became the passionate advocate for exactly the opposite.

So the tax-cutting candidate ended up increasing the overall tax take in the economy. The politician who never stopped criticising the 35-hour week left it on the statute books. The president who wanted to free the French from their complex about wealth and success ended up regarded as a cliquey “president of the rich”. The leader who promised to promote a French Condoleezza Rice finished his term with no ethnic-minority ministers in any senior government

positions—and turned to toxic talk about “too many immigrants” in an unapologetic chase for the far-right vote at the end of his presidential campaign.

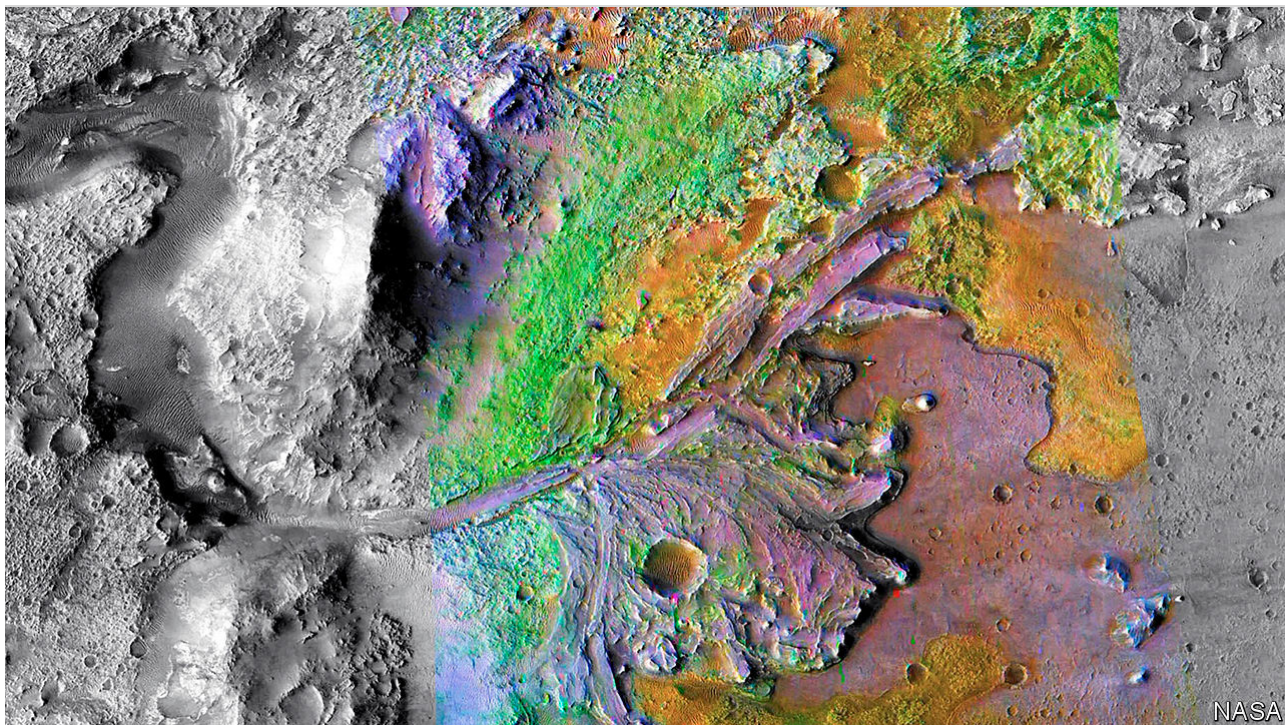
Through all of this, Mr Sarkozy seemed unable to control his own impulses, whether it was to show off his new girlfriend (Carla Bruni), or humiliate another leader in public (Silvio Berlusconi), or simply manage his temper (cursing at a passer-by at an agricultural fair). If his political results had been more impressive, the French might have forgiven him these foibles. They weren't, so they didn't.

His is a tale of showmanship over application, of haste over deliberation, of transparency over reserve. Yasmina Reza, the French playwright, put it well when she wrote of Mr Sarkozy's restless desire to “combat the slippage of time”. But this time he could not stop the clock. The French did not so much vote for Mr Hollande as against Mr Sarkozy. He ended up defeating himself. What a waste.

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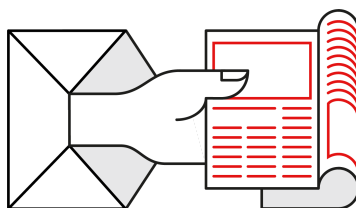
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