

# The Devil's Chessboard: The JFK Assassination Plot Mirrored in 1961 France. Kennedy's Show of Support for Charles de Gaulle

## Part II

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For Part I, [click here](#).

*As you watch, perhaps with alarm, while thousands of refugees from Muslim countries make their way through Europe in a seemingly endless parade, you may be wondering if some of them will end up living near you, and how this might affect your life.*

*If you step back and look at the bigger picture, you will see the situation in reverse: how much the dominating presence of those from the western world has affected the daily lives of people living in Muslim countries.*

*What the colonial powers have done in Muslim countries is well known. Less well known are the machinations of Allen Dulles and the CIA in one of these colonial powers, France.*

*Without the knowledge or consent of President John F. Kennedy, Allen Dulles orchestrated the efforts of retired French generals, rightwing French, Nazi sympathizers, and at least one White Russian, to overthrow Charles de Gaulle, who wanted to give Algeria its independence. Dulles et al feared an independent Algeria would go Communist, giving the Soviets a base in Africa.*

*And there was another reason to hang onto Algeria: its natural resources. According to the [US Energy Information Administration](#), it is "the leading natural gas producer in Africa, the second-largest natural gas supplier to Europe outside of the region, and is among the top three oil producers in Africa."*

*We note with great interest that the plot to bring down Charles De Gaulle — the kind of people involved, the role of Allen Dulles, the motive behind it — all bear an eerie similarity to the circumstances surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy. But that is another story.*

*As we have said earlier, Dulles's job, simply put, was to hijack the US government to benefit the wealthy. And in this fascinating series of excerpts from David Talbot's new biography on Dulles, we see how his reach extended deeply into the government of France.*

***WhoWhatWhy Introduction by Milicent Cranor***

This is the second of a three-part series of excerpts from Chapter 15 (“Contempt”) of [The Devil’s Chessboard: Allen Dulles, the CIA, and the Rise of the American Secret Government](#). HarperCollins Publishers, 2015. Go [here](#) and [here](#) to see Parts 1 and 3. Previously, we presented excerpts from Chapter 20, and to see them, go [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

## KENNEDY GETS A BAD SURPRISE

On January 26, Dulles sent a report to the new president on the French situation that seemed to be preparing Kennedy for de Gaulle’s imminent elimination, without giving any hint of the CIA’s own involvement in the plot. “A pre-revolutionary atmosphere reigns in France,” Dulles informed JFK.

“The Army and the Air Force are staunchly opposed to de Gaulle,” the spymaster continued, exaggerating the extent of the military opposition, as if to present the demise of the French president as a *fait accompli*. “At least 80 percent of the officers are violently against him. They haven’t forgotten that in 1958, he had given his word of honor that he would never abandon Algeria. He is now reneging on his promise, and they hate him for that. De Gaulle surely won’t last if he tries to let go of Algeria. Everything will probably be over for him by the end of the year — he will be either deposed or assassinated.”

Dulles clearly knew much more, but he wasn’t sharing it with Kennedy.



President De Gaulle stands between President Kennedy and Mrs. Kennedy on the steps of the Élysée Palace in Paris, 1961.

Photo credit: [U. S. Department of State image in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston.](#)

When the coup against de Gaulle began three months later, Kennedy was still in the dark. It was a tumultuous time for the young administration. As he continued to wrestle with fallout from the Bay of Pigs crisis, JFK was suddenly besieged with howls of outrage from a major ally, accusing his own security services of seditious activity.

Kennedy then underlined how deeply estranged he was from his own security machinery by taking the extraordinary step of asking Alphand for the French

government's help to track down the US officials behind the coup, promising to fully punish them.

It was a stinging embarrassment for the new American president, who was scheduled to fly to Paris for a state visit the following month. To add to the insult, the coup had been triggered by de Gaulle's efforts to bring French colonial rule in Algeria to an end — a goal that JFK himself had ardently championed.

The CIA's support for the coup was one more defiant display of contempt — a back of the hand aimed not only at de Gaulle but at Kennedy.

JFK took pains to assure Paris that he strongly supported de Gaulle's presidency, phoning Hervé Alphand, the French ambassador in Washington, to directly communicate these assurances. But, according to Alphand, Kennedy's disavowal of official US involvement in the coup came with a disturbing addendum — the American president could not vouch for his own intelligence agency. Kennedy told Alphand that "the CIA is such a vast and poorly controlled machine that the most unlikely maneuvers might be true."

## **JFK TO FRENCH: HELP FIND AMERICANS INVOLVED IN PLOT**

This admission of presidential impotence, which Alphand reported to Paris, was a startling moment in US foreign relations, though it remains largely unknown today. Kennedy then underlined how deeply estranged he was from his own security machinery by taking the extraordinary step of asking Alphand for the French government's help to track down the US officials behind the coup, promising to fully punish them.

"[Kennedy] would be quite ready to take all necessary measures in the interest of good Franco-American relations, whatever the rank or functions of [the] incriminated people," Alphand cabled French foreign minister Maurice Couve de Murville.

In the wake of the crises in Cuba and France provoked by his own security officials, Kennedy began to display a new boldness. JFK's assertiveness surprised CIA officials, who had apparently counted on Kennedy to be sidelined during the French coup.

To solidify his support for de Gaulle, Kennedy ordered US Ambassador James Gavin to offer the French leader "any help" he might need — clearly indicating that US troops would even fire on rebel forces from Algeria if they tried to land at American military bases in France. De Gaulle proudly declined the offer as "well-intentioned, but inappropriate" — perhaps horrified at the prospect of American GIs killing French soldiers on his nation's soil. But Kennedy did arrange for US base commanders to take steps to camouflage landing sites, in case rebel planes attempted to use them.

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Agency officials assured coup leaders that the president would be too "absorbed in the Cuban affair" to act decisively against the plot. But JFK did react quickly to the French crisis, putting on high alert Ambassador Gavin, a decorated paratrooper commander in World War

He who could be counted on to keep NATO forces in line. The president also dispatched his French speaking press spokesman, Pierre Salinger, to Paris to communicate directly with Élysée Palace officials.

As Paris officials knew, the new American president already had something of a prickly relationship with de Gaulle, but he had strong feelings for France — and they made sure to absolve JFK of personal responsibility for the coup in their leaks to the press. French press accounts referred to the CIA as a “reactionary state within a state” that operated outside of Kennedy’s control.

After JFK’s death, Alphant spoke fondly of the bonds between Kennedy and France. “He thought that harmonious relations between the US and France were a fundamental element of world equilibrium. He knew France as a boy. He came to France for his holidays — the south of France — and he knew France also through his wife. Jacqueline made many, many trips to Paris. I know that Jacqueline helped him very much to understand France. She loves France — she has French blood — she speaks our language very well and she asked him to read the memoirs of General de Gaulle.”



Four rebellious French Generals who tried to overthrow President Charles de Gaulle in order to keep the French departments of Algeria as part of France. Picture was taken in 1961 in Algiers (French Algeria). From left to right French Generals André Zeller, Edmond Jouhaud, Raoul Salan and Maurice Challe. Photo credit: [Wikimedia](#)

Kennedy’s strong show of support for de Gaulle undoubtedly helped fortify French resolve against the rebellious generals. In the midst of the crisis, the American president issued a public message to de Gaulle, telling him, “In this grave hour for France, I want you to know of my continuing friendship and support as well as that of the American people.”

### ***“FASCISM WILL NOT PASS!”***

But it was de Gaulle himself, and the French people, who turned the tide against the coup. By Sunday, the second day of the coup, a dark foreboding had settled over Paris. “I am surprised that you are still alive,” the president of France’s National Assembly bluntly told de Gaulle that morning. “If I were Challe, I would have already swooped down on Paris; the army here will move out of the way rather than shoot.... If I were in the position Challe put

himself in, as soon as I burst in, I would have you executed with a bullet in the back, here in the stairwell, and say you were trying to flee.” De Gaulle himself realized that if Challe did airlift his troops from Algiers to France, “there was not much to stop them.”

But at eight o’clock that evening, a defiant de Gaulle went on the air, as nearly all of France gathered around the TV, and rallied his nation with the most inspiring address of his long public career. He looked exhausted, with dark circles under his eyes. But he had put on his soldier’s uniform for the occasion, and his voice was full of passion.

De Gaulle began by denouncing the rebellious generals. The nation had been betrayed “by men whose duty, honor and *raison d’être* it was to serve and to obey.” Now it was the duty of every French citizen to protect the nation from these military traitors. “In the name of France,” de Gaulle shouted, thumping the table in front of him, “I order that all means — I repeat all means — be employed to block the road everywhere to those men!”

De Gaulle’s final words were a battle cry. “*Françaises, Français! Aidez moi!*” And all over France, millions of people did rush to the aid of their nation. The following day, a general strike was organized to protest the putsch. Led primarily by the left, including labor unions and the Communist Party, the mass protest won broad political support.

Over ten million people joined the nationwide demonstrations, with hundreds of thousands marching in the streets of Paris, carrying banners proclaiming “Peace in Algeria” and shouting, “Fascism will not pass!” Even police officers associations expressed “complete solidarity” with the protests, as did the Roman Catholic Confederation, which denounced the “criminal acts” of the coup leaders, warning that they “threaten to plunge the country into civil war.”

Hundreds of people rushed to the nation’s airfields and prepared to block the runways with their vehicles if Challe’s planes tried to land. Others gathered outside government ministries in Paris to guard them against attack. André Malraux, the great novelist turned minister of culture, threaded his way through one such crowd, handing out helmets and uniforms. Meanwhile, at the huge Renault factory on the outskirts of Paris, workers took control of the sprawling complex and formed militias, demanding weapons from the government so that they could fend off rebel assaults.

“In many ways, France, and particularly Paris, relived its great revolutionary past Sunday night and Monday — the past of the revolutionary barricades, of vigilance committees and of workers’ councils,” reported *The New York Times*.

De Gaulle’s ringing address to the nation and the massive public response had a sobering effect on the French military. Challe’s support quickly began melting away, even — humiliatingly — within the ranks of his own military branch, the air force. Pilots flew their planes out of Algeria, and others feigned mechanical troubles, depriving Challe’s troops of the air transport they needed to descend on Paris.

Meanwhile, de Gaulle moved quickly to arrest military officers in France who were involved in the coup. Police swooped down on the Paris apartment of an army captain who was plotting pro-putsch street riots, and de Gaulle’s minister of the interior seized the general in charge of the rebel forces that were gathered in the forests outside Paris. Deprived of their leader, the insurrectionary units sheepishly began to disperse.

By Tuesday night, Challe knew that the coup had failed. The next day, he surrendered and was flown to Paris. Challe emerged from the plane “carrying his own suitcase, looking crumpled and insignificant in civilian clothes,” according to *Time*. “He stumbled at the foot of the landing steps, [falling] heavily on his hands and knees.” It was an ignominious homecoming for the man who had fully believed that, with US support, he was to replace the great de Gaulle.

Challe expected to face a firing squad, but de Gaulle’s military tribunal proved surprisingly merciful, sentencing the fifty-five-year-old general to fifteen years in prison.

Next: [Part 3](#).

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