

*Charles the Bold**

DE LAMAR JENSEN**

Five hundred years ago an illustrious ruler, impressively named Charles the Bold, strode briefly across the center stage of history. His formal title was Duke of Burgundy, but his personal domains and power extended through all of central Europe. In addition to the large Duchy of Burgundy, incorporated later into France, he was also ruler of Franche-Comté (the Free County of Burgundy), lying within the Holy Roman Empire of Germany; the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg; and the rich provinces and states of the Netherlands. From his famous father, Philip the Good, he had inherited not only prestige and wealth but diplomatic and personal ties with many of the great powers of the time.

But Charles the Bold was a restless and ambitious man. Not satisfied with ruling the scattered domains of his predecessors, although they were among the choicest of the continent; and not content with the title of mere duke, even when his court was the wealthiest and most garish of all Europe, Charles had visions of creating a mighty empire lying between France and Germany and extending from the North Sea to the Mediterranean. And for himself? Nothing less than the title and honor of king. He already commanded the most famous non-regal order of knighthood on the continent, the Order of the Golden Fleece, but his appetite was insatiable. He must carve out of central Europe a new kingdom, a third force reminiscent of the one once ruled by Lothar, Charlemagne's grandson, six centuries before, which could balance off the two great powers lying to the east and west of him. He had many cultural and economic ties with the King of France (he was in fact the king's vassal for the Burgundian duchy) and his relations with the German emperor were at least cordial. But Charles trusted neither of them. Invading armies had crossed Burgundy before on their way to either France or Germany, and they would do

*This essay was originally written in 1965 while the author was living in France.

**Dr. Jensen is professor of history at Brigham Young University.

so again unless Burgundy itself were strong enough to stop them. The fact that the duke's estimate of his eastern rival's strength was vastly exaggerated does not change the reality of his aggressive fears.

Charles stood not only geographically between two potential powers, he also straddled two periods of time. He thought of himself and his destiny as a man of the future, yet he lived in the glory of the past. His spirit was torn between memories of ancient grandeur and hope for future renown. But medieval knight-errantry finally prevailed over common sense. Unable to resolve his inner contradictions, he strode fearlessly, and needlessly, to destruction. Failing to recognize the need and reality of diplomacy in the modern world (for his was also a modern world), and being too self-confident and obstinate to make good use of it even if he had, Charles met defeat and death at the hands of his neighbors—the Lorrainers, the Alsations, and the Swiss—who might all have been allies had he not frightened and angered them with his extravagant plans and his arrogant bearing.

Today another bold Charles takes his place in the historical spotlight. The eyes of the world are focused upon him, partly because he is a great actor, partly because he sets the stage himself and operates his own lights. General Charles de Gaulle is not a simple personality. His mind is quick, his capabilities diverse, and his fortitude unquestioned. Visitors report that he can be graceful, charming, and kind—but he usually is not. Few leaders in the contemporary world can boast of such political successes. None can match the almost providential regularity of his fulfilled predictions. But there is much of the fifteenth-century duke in him. He is ambitious—for himself and for his country—arrogant, and uncompromising. He has visions of creating in France a powerful third force between East and West, while still holding his place, indeed, enlarging it, in the counsels of Western powers. To do this he wants a strong France and a prosperous European Community. But for his purposes the latter must be dominated by France, not by Germany or Great Britain. NATO does not fulfill his needs because it is controlled by the United States. So he sets his bold course, indifferent to the broader needs of society, or believing they can only be realized through him.

Charles de Gaulle's success has been phenomenal. His singleness of purpose and his ability to completely ignore all opposition or dissent have carried him from the obscurity of a minor field officer, advocating a mobile armored army, to a feared protagonist in the great-power politics of our day. Through it all he has been the center of controversy, first as cantankerous leader of the Free French, then as head of the first post-war French government, and later as the taciturn and aloof opponent of the Fourth Republic. Since his prophetic return to power in 1958 he has accumulated an impressive record of triumphs. From the residue of a moribund political institution he quickly created a stable, orderly, and effective government—though noticeably less democratic than its predecessor. When securely in office he began a systematic attack on the major problems that had been festering in France since the end of World War II. The magnitude of his achievement should not be overlooked. In four short years he re-established French financial stability and greatly accelerated economic growth; reduced Communist strength at the polls and all but eliminated it in the legislature; ended the disastrous Algerian war; presided over the virtual liquidation of the costly French empire; and reached a remarkable agreement with Germany. At the same time he pushed his country through the nuclear barrier, and modernized the French army under the auspices of the controversial, but nationally popular, *Force de frappe*. The transformation of France between 1958 and 1962 was nothing short of a revolution; and, although some elements of the society were alarmed and resentful (the generals in Algeria regarded de Gaulle's colonial policy as a betrayal of France), the majority of Frenchmen hailed his achievements with admiration and devotion.

But there was more to this policy than the restoration of French stability, strength, and self-respect. These were means to a more ambitious end. De Gaulle had reduced French commitments in Africa and Asia in order to consolidate and strengthen the French position in Europe. Like his medieval namesake, he hopes to hold the balance of power between East and West. De Gaulle is no friend of Communism, but he is not satisfied with a Western alliance in which France plays only a subordinate role. This ambition to make the French presence paramount in Western councils underlies all of his exasperatingly inde-

pendent actions from the torpedoing of British membership in the Common Market to his complete military withdrawal from NATO.

Much of his immediate success—and hopefully his long-range contribution to the Western alliance—comes from his ability to recognize and probe the weak spots in the present structure. The freeing of Algeria, for example, was certainly an unhappy decision for the prestige-conscious general, but he realized that so long as Algeria remained a part of France it would continue to be a costly and explosive liability. He was willing to pay the price of temporary disappointment and even rebellion to gain the realistic goals of more effective national power. Equally perceptive were his more recent positions on the European grain-price controversy, recognition of Red China, the multilateral nuclear force, world monetary standards, and NATO. In each case he has put his finger on the heart of a real problem. His proposed solutions have ranged from the embarrassing to the ridiculous, but he has made Americans painfully aware of the need for new thinking about old situations. And he has reminded us that in international relations a pugnacious partner can be just as disconcerting as an offensive foe.

But de Gaulle has done more than this. By his pontifical, charismatic manner and his crude sense of grandeur, he has succeeded in alienating many of his allies. Even his staunchest supporters in France are becoming increasingly embarrassed by his international antics. His policy, like Charles the Bold's, may lead to his own destruction by detaching his best friends—not so much the United States, which can afford to ignore him more than it does—but his European allies and the people of France, who are even more directly affected by his actions. Recent strikes in France and his poor showing in the latest elections indicate a growing domestic disenchantment. As a consequence of this setback, it is not likely that the statesmen of Europe will feel the continuing need to submit to his demands as they have in the past. De Gaulle's greatest liability is his own personality and lack of diplomacy. Boldness and audacity may be successful against an enemy but can be harmful when carelessly used against friends. One playing such a consciously historical role as is Charles de Gaulle would do well to reflect on the lesson of Charles the Bold.