



## France on the Brink: A Great Civilization in the New Century

By Jonathan Fenby

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**France on the Brink: A Great Civilization in the New Century** By Jonathan Fenby

This completely revised and fully updated edition of the book Bill Bryson called “superb” presents a sharply insightful, authoritative portrait of France today as it struggles to live up to its vision of itself amid storm clouds that won’t go away.

*France on the Brink* was chosen as a *New York Times* book of the year and hailed by the *Wall Street Journal* as “a comprehensive and entertaining diagnosis of what ails French society” when the first edition was published at the turn of the century. Since then, the crisis enveloping France has only worsened, and this second edition, completely revamped to cover the developments of the past fifteen years, offers a fresh assessment of where the nation stands. New chapters chart political developments under Presidents Chirac, Sarkozy, and Hollande; the rise of the hard right National Front; and the unrelenting economic woes that have led to unprecedented levels of disillusion and fragmentation. The country’s social evolution is covered comprehensively, with description and analysis of urban and rural life, regional divisions, tensions over immigration and the fading of the symbols that denoted France’s greatness.

High unemployment, an archaic economic system, a self-selecting governing class unable to handle serious problems, and a debilitating clash between individualism and the powerful state machine that was built on a foundation reaching back to the Revolution of 1789 continue to plague the nation, making it less able than ever to fulfill its role as a world leader. The economic crisis and the European Union’s ongoing fiscal instability, as well as a parade of scandals at the top, have left it weaker than ever halfway into the second decade of the new century.

Jonathan Fenby has covered France for fifty years. In this new edition, he offers a loving though candid and unvarnished picture of the nation, contrasting its glorious past with current realities. He explores not only the problems and the challenges but also the opportunities that lie ahead if only its political class can finally face reality—and carry the people along with them. Filled with contemporary and historical anecdotes, *France on the Brink* depicts the many

contradictory aspects of the world's most complex, seductive, and sometimes infuriating country, and will give even the most knowledgeable Francophile plenty to think about.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

Images of France frequently include smartly dressed Parisians; sidewalk cafés serving strong coffee and fresh pastries to elegantly clad, chain-smoking students; the rolling hills of Provence draped in lavender; and wizened farmers in berets selling freshly grown vegetables, cheese, and homemade bread at the local market. Or at least they used to. In *France on the Brink*, Jonathan Fenby depicts France as a modern nation far removed from the stereotypes of its past.

Fenby's introductory chapter presents a catalogue of France's virtues and contributions to culture over the centuries. He devotes the remainder of the book to debunking the French myth, examining what he perceives as its collision course with the realities of the 21st century. The 13 self-contained chapters analyze particular elements of French existence and illustrate how it arrived at its present stage of near collapse. Having spent 30 years either living in France or observing it as a journalist, Fenby commands a firm grasp of French life, politics, regional differences, and national mood. This expertise is illustrated by his breadth of analysis--of everything from baguettes to the National Front, from Mitterrand to Bardot, from economics to agriculture.

Despite the pessimism implied by Fenby's title, he concludes his study on an optimistic note: He views the *cohabitation* between the Gaullist President Jacques Chirac and the socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin as a unique opportunity to lead a fresh revolution, one that embraces the modern world while preserving the best of the past. --*Bertina Loeffler Sedlack*

#### From Publishers Weekly

There are more facts and stories in Fenby's primer on what ails France than there are bubbles in a magnum of champagne. Fenby, a British journalist who reported from France for 30 years, methodically and relentlessly undermines France's notion of itself. Most of the critiques are not novel (we know that not nearly as many French people belonged to the Resistance as claim they did), but they have never been collected in one place with such remarkable detail and insight. Fenby's most biting criticism is reserved for the rampant corruption in former president Mitterrand's socialist regime, which publicly eschewed the lure of money while privately putting cash in the pockets of its loyal followers. Fenby is especially trenchant when writing about France's blindness to the dark side of its soul that permits the racist politician Jean-Marie Le Pen to consistently garner between 10% and 20% of the vote in regional elections. Even Fenby's guardedly optimistic conclusion reads like forced cheer: that the "cohabitation" (the term used by the French to describe a regime in which the prime minister and the president belong to different parties) of France's current government could force France's warring factions to cooperate in the salvation of their country. Fenby's fear is that France (in its nostalgia for its cultural glory, in its obsolete insistence on heavy-handed government regulation, in its Gaullist exceptionalism) is ill-prepared to take its place in a unified Europe. Observant and knowledgeable, Fenby tops off his sober tour de France by revealing that, today, more fois gras is made in Eastern Europe than in the Dordogne region that made it famous. (July)

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#### From Library Journal

This is a fascinating, provocative, and highly readable book that should appeal to all those interested in contemporary French society and culture. The author, a well-known British journalist who has been reporting from or about France for over 30 years, has assembled a meticulously researched and strongly convincing compendium of the ills he believes beset today's France. Pessimistic and sure to prove

controversial, his account presents a "nation at risk" whose decline he traces over the last three decades. Fenby provides a wealth of examples: a criminal justice system in crisis, the waning of country customs, changing demographics, an aging population, the plummeting status of politicians, and a debilitating nostalgia for the past. Most intriguing is Fenby's presentation of the disconnection he sees between vital elements of the French national image and the way the French actually live. What's needed now is new national vision and new national leadership, he concludes. For public and academic libraries. AMarie Marmo Mullaney, Caldwell Coll., NJ  
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#### **Clorinda Combs:**

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