

As Mitterrand Fades Out, Startling Reconciliation

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Int Her Trib 13-14 May 95 p 2

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New York Times Service

PARIS — President François Mitterrand has stirred a new controversy in his final days in office with two speeches on the

reconciliation of France and Germany after World War II.

Mr. Mitterrand, 78, and dying of cancer of the prostate, will turn over the presidency next Wednesday to Jacques Chirac, who was elected Sunday.

In an impromptu speech in Berlin on Monday on the 50th anniversary of the German surrender, Mr. Mitterrand startled some of his listeners by appearing to administer an act of absolution to the Germans.

"This is one of my last offi-

cial acts," he said then. "I am proud to be here with you. It is the least I owe to Germany."

"This country, my own, which was at first defeated and occupied, shared victory with its Allies — thanks to them but also thanks to the physical and spiritual revulsion it felt at the horror of the concentration camps and the Holocaust," he said.

"I have not come to celebrate the victory I rejoiced in for my country in 1945," he concluded. "I have not come to underline the defeat, because I knew how much strength there was in the German people, its qualities, its courage, never mind what uniform it wore or even what motivated the soldiers who were about to die in such great numbers. They were courageous. They were prepared to die. For a bad cause, but what they did had nothing to do with that. They loved their country."

Mr. Mitterrand's main message was that 50 years ago Europe had won a victory over itself and over the dark side of nationalism, and that the lessons of that struggle had yet to be learned all over the continent.

But to some ears, he also seemed to be saying that if 18-year-old draftees into the German Army could be forgiven, then so could the Nazi SS legions who perpetrated the worst atrocities.

"The only German soldiers whose courage I respect are those who deserted or rose up in revolt," said Jacques Attali, a former aide to Mr. Mitterrand who said he was in "complete disagreement" with the words the president had chosen.

Alfred Grosser, a French professor of political science who has been one of the architects of postwar reconciliation with Germany, said: "The president did not distinguish sufficiently between Germans who were responsible for atrocities and those who tried to resist them."

Mr. Mitterrand's office let his words speak for themselves.