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Amaury Lorin, *Paul Doumer. La République audacieuse*. Paris: Champ Vallon, 2022. 416 pp. 27.00 € (pb). ISBN 9791026710301; 18.99 € (eb). ISBN 9791026710318.

Review by Philip Nord, Princeton University.

For what is Paul Doumer remembered today? He served an eventful stint as governor-general of French Indochina from 1897 to 1902. He was elected president of the Republic in 1931, only to be cut down by an assassin's bullet less than a year into his term. That is about it. True, Doumer served as minister of Finances on three separate occasions, but altogether he spent less than two years in office as a cabinet member. No celebrated item of legislation bears Doumer's name, and he was never made prime minister. It would be hard to make the case that Doumer was anything but a figure of the second rank. And yet, as Amaury Lorin's biography of the man makes clear, Doumer's career is illustrative of what it took to climb from humble beginnings to the nation's first office in the era of France's Third Republic.

For Doumer's beginnings were humble. He was born in 1857 in the Auvergne, the son of a railway man. Primary school behind him, he apprenticed as a metal engraver. But Doumer was a focused and diligent young man, who taught himself Latin and took night classes, a seat-of-the-pants education that enabled him to pass the baccalaureate exam at age twenty. Doumer did not stop there. He went on to earn a *licence* in mathematics—he was good at numbers—which opened the doors to the professoriate. He went on to teach *collège* for a couple of years, made an advantageous marriage, and began a family that would in time grow to nine children, five boys and four girls. Education, and the diplomas it led to, had lifted Doumer out of the working class, transmuting a boy from the provinces into a man of parts, a professor and paterfamilias. France's vaunted meritocracy, it seemed, had worked its magic to perfection.

Doumer, as it happened, was not just a hard worker but also a skilled networker. He took up writing newspaper articles for a provincial newspaper, *Le Courrier de l'Aisne*. He joined a masonic lodge, L'Union fraternelle. And he involved himself in the affairs of the Ligue de l'enseignement, a natural move for a man, like Doumer, with teaching experience. He made connections along the way, the republican historian Henri Martin most important among them, and this in turn opened political doors. Doumer was elected to the Laon city council in 1884 (Laon was the *chef-lieu* of the Aisne department) and then deputy of the Aisne itself in 1888. Transplanted to Paris, he sought out patrons and found them in Charles Floquet and Léon Bourgeois, leading Radical politicians of the day. When Bourgeois took office in 1895 as France's first Radical prime minister, he tapped Doumer to be minister of Finances, a critical post in an administration that made passage of an income-tax the center-piece of its legislative agenda. The tax was blocked in

the Senate, and Bourgeois' government folded in less than five months. Still, for Doumer who was not yet forty, these were heady times. He had mastered the ABCs of republican politics: what associations to join, how to run a campaign, who to know. He had every reason to expect, whatever present setbacks, that great things lay ahead.

Nor did Doumer have to wait long before an opening presented itself. Bourgeois was succeeded as prime minister by Jules Méline, and Méline had a post to fill: the governor-generalship of Indochina. He offered it to Doumer who did not hesitate to grasp the brass ring. The move cost Doumer political friends. He was a Radical and Méline a conservative. Many on the French Left never forgave Doumer his opportunism, but, as he saw it, here was a chance to make a reputation for himself, and he did not mean to let it slip away. In the event, Doumer did earn a reputation, and just how, as Lorin's volume makes clear, is instructive about the workings of the French imperium in the Far East and the dividends that imperial service paid to up-and-comers like Doumer.

Doumer's five-year tenure as governor-general earned him a nickname: the "Colbert of Indochina." He was a whirlwind of activity, promoting railway construction and the building of a bridge over the Red River in Hanoi that for decades was known as the Pont Doumer. Such projects cost money, and Paris made it plain that it was not willing to pay. So Doumer created revenue-generating monopolies on the sale of salt, opium, and rice alcohol. The imperial administration ballooned as a result, the departments and inspectorates proliferating, but this suited Doumer. He was not given to government by consultation. French *colons*, concentrated in Cochinchina in the south, had electoral rights: to vote for Saigon's mayor and, from 1881, to send a deputy to the National Assembly in Paris. Doumer distanced himself from *colon* politics in the most literal sense, relocating the colony's capital from Saigon to Hanoi, where he had a splendid governor-general's mansion built in the beaux-arts style. As for Indochina's indigenous population, for *them*, Doumer had even less regard. The "superior races" (his term) had a vocation to rule. For starters, this meant sidelining the region's mandarin elite and reducing the Annamite Nguyen dynasty to figurehead status. It also meant turning over exploitation of the colony's resources--tin, rubber, rice production--to Europeans. To that purpose, Doumer's administration set about expropriating local lands and transferring them into the covetous hands of European-owned concessionary companies. Doumer was a Colbert all right, an indefatigable dirigiste who governed by decree and kept competing interests and "lesser breeds" in their place.

Doumer's Indochina experience redirected his political trajectory in ways that proved advantageous. Even as he lost left-wing friends, he found new ones elsewhere. He became a darling of the colonial lobby first of all, which touted him as a model imperial administrator. It was an association that lasted Doumer's lifetime. Doumer became president of the Republic in the spring of 1931, and not days into his term, he paid a visit to the Exposition coloniale where he was shown around by the expo's presiding spirit, "son ami Lyautey" (p. 329). Doumer also had a "friend" in the steel magnate, François de Wendel, long-time president of the Comité des forges. In the years just prior to the Great War in fact, Doumer dabbled in business himself. He served as vice-president of a lobbying group, the Union des industries métallurgiques et minières, a post he occupied until 1914, and as president of an actual business from 1911 to 1927, the Compagnie générale d'électricité, progenitor of today's Alcatel-Alsthom.

For Doumer, such associations set him on a fast-track to success. He returned to the Palais Bourbon as deputy from the Aisne in 1902 and got himself named president of the Chamber's

budget commission. Then in 1905, with the help of right-wing votes, Doumer was elected president of the Chamber itself. The *Élysée* now lay within his sights, and on President Loubet's retirement in 1906, Doumer made a run. But he had over-reached. His all-too-rapid ascent, his *affairisme*, and his political flip-flopping had made him enemies. The Left rallied around another life-long politician, Armand Fallières, a reliable but colorless figure, and Doumer went down to defeat, soon followed by a second setback, defeat in the legislative elections of 1910. Doumer's backers parachuted him into Corsica, where he was elected Senator in 1912. He still had a career and a position, but otherwise, it was not at all clear where the path forward, and upward, lay.

The Great War changed all that. As German armies careened toward Paris in 1914, the city's military governor, General Joseph Gallieni, took charge of blocking the enemy's progress. Doumer volunteered to serve as Gallieni's civilian right-hand man, and the offer was accepted. Gallieni, like Doumer, had once been a crack imperial administrator (he had been governor-general of Madagascar). The two men both had a gift for command, and they understood each other. Gallieni's team, most important of all, succeeded in stopping the German advance. This was a colossal achievement, and Doumer's part in it helped to bootstrap him into the presidency of the Senate's Commission de l'armée, a position of considerable influence. The war also cost him four sons. Three were killed in combat. A fourth was gassed and invalidated out of the army never fully to recover. He died in 1923. Such losses were crushing to Doumer's family. Yet, cruel as it is to say, for politicians, there is sometimes gain in bereavement. Doumer had given all for the nation, and in a France drained by wartime loss, such sacrifice redounded to Doumer's credit. It was a political asset and one that he drew on for advantage in the war's aftermath. He spoke up for veterans; he insisted on reparations; he opposed compromise, let alone rapprochement, with Germany's Weimar regime. Such positions were the common coin of 1920s French politics, but they carried a special weight when articulated by Doumer, a "living symbol" in Lorin's phrasing, of patriotic devotion.

Now, the opportunities and honors began to flow thick and fast. Doumer was named twice to serve as minister of Finances, both times by Aristide Briand. On neither occasion did he serve long, but he emerged from office with a reputation for on-time budget-making and scrupulous economy. Little wonder that the Senate finance commission named him president by acclamation in 1926. He was elected president of the Senate itself the next year with almost no opposition. He had to edge out Briand, a supposed friend, for the presidency of the Republic in 1931, but win he did, and there he was: Paul Doumer, the small-town boy from nowhere, now the balding, bearded patriarch of the Republic.

It was a long climb, and the real interest in Lorin's story is in how Doumer made it. No doubt, he had character. Doumer was an early-riser and tee-totaler, a demon worker, who was also a stickler for punctuality. Although of modest origins, France's diploma mill gave a person of his qualities a chance, and Doumer seized it. A good marriage helped. This was a patriarchal world, and Doumer's wife, Blanche, knew her role. She gave birth to children, followed Doumer pillar to post, and otherwise kept in the background. No hint of scandal here: Doumer was a solid, family man. Now, he might have settled for a career as a high-school math professor, but he ventured into politics. It is not clear that he had any great talent for oratory or glad-handing, but he did have one for networking. Doumer travelled in the right circles, whether fraternizing with Freemasons or hobnobbing with the *parti colonial*, and he found patrons along the way to give his career that extra boost: the likes of Floquet and Bourgeois when he was starting out, the likes of Wendel, Gallieni, and Lyautey in later years as he circled closer to the centers of power. And

when power at last came his way, he exercised it with a single-minded determination. Doumer administered Indochina with a dirigiste, at times high-handed, rigor. He handed down budgets that met the standards of the day's financial orthodoxy. When it came to the mechanics of running things, Doumer had an insider's knowledge of the Republic's institutions and the way they functioned. In all, he compiled a bio that made for compelling reading in a France that was then a Republic. Doumer was a provincial who had made good on his merits. He was an economical man who spurned the high-spending ways of Parisian high society. Not least of all, he was a deep-dyed patriot, at once a notorious enthusiast of imperial grandeur and grieving father who had sacrificed four boys in the nation's service.

Lorin's biography is subtitled *La République audacieuse*. Doumer, however, was not so much a bold man as an ambitious one. His life is exemplary of what it took to get ahead in politics in France's Third Republic. Yet, at more than one moment, the reader, this one in any event, is tempted to generalize Lorin's findings. Doumer's life exemplifies what it took and, *mutatis mutandis*, still takes to get ahead in the politics of a democratic republic. Read this way, Lorin's story is about something more than a secondary figure in a by-gone regime. It is also about our own time.

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