

Tempest in an Opium Pot

By C. L. SULZBERGER

PARIS—The world has been having a field day with the real-life thriller story of plots, counterplots, drugs, contraband and other James Bond divertissements apparently unfolding as a consequence of the arrest in New Jersey of a minor French espionage official charged with dope smuggling.

The verbal fallout from this event has become absorbing reading matter although much is without foundation. Thus it is not apparently in any sense true that there is a clash between the American C.I.A. and its French counterpart, S.D.E.C.E., nor that S.D.E.C.E. is being riven by internal purges.

Dope and espionage were certainly involved in the arrest last April of a former S.D.E.C.E. agent named Roger Delouette. Delouette was calling for an imported car loaded with 96 pounds of heroin. He claimed to be acting under instructions from an S.D.E.C.E. official.

The case ballooned in importance. Drugs, of course, are a major preoccupation in the United States, and chauvinistic steam was worked up about the French poisoning American youngsters.

For their part, the French have already been regaled with tales of how S.D.E.C.E. agents were involved in the murder of a Moroccan left-wing politician named Ben Barka, and of the so-called "Topaz" case. "Topaz," an American novel, was based on charges of an S.D.E.C.E. agent in Washington that high French Government officials were leaking information to Russia.

S.D.E.C.E. is a postwar organization of mixed antecedents. These included de Gaulle's émigré intelligence organization in wartime London, a similar structure in North Africa, parts of the old Pétainist Second Bureau and Resistance groups inside occupied France.

From its start, shortly after the war, S.D.E.C.E. has been preoccupied with crises. First came Indochina, then the cold war. Then there was the Algerian partisan conflict and finally the struggle with the O.A.S. (secret Army organization) conspiracy.

The Algerian guerrillas depended on foreign arms supplies, so S.D.E.C.E. got into the brutal business of fighting gunrunners with dummy organizations such as the ruthless "Red Hand." Murder and kidnapping became one aspect of its operation. S.D.E.C.E. took in some toughs from criminal elements

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and also another bunch of hard nuts who had served as Gaullist bully boys during the general's early years of exile and who were called S.A.C. (Service of Civic Action).

As Francophone Africa became independent, de Gaulle's Fifth Republic organized a special intelligence branch under Jacques Foccart to keep the new states on the road to survival and also close to France. S.A.C. survivors joined that special secretariat.

When the Ben Barka case blew in 1966 both Foccart's and S.D.E.C.E.'s name became tarnished by scandal. De Gaulle decided to rein in S.D.E.C.E. and put it under the Defense Ministry, replacing its boss with Gen. Eugène Guibaud, a regular officer.

Guibaud put S.D.E.C.E. into its proper place in a civilian regime that had terminated the threat of civil war. He discharged unsavory thug elements. He was asked to stay on an extra year and finally was replaced in 1970 by Count Alexandre de Marenches.

In French eyes, Marenches, a huge man, is the typical pro-"Anglo-Saxon." His wife is British, his mother was American, his father served as liaison officer on General Pershing's staff. He speaks perfect English. Nevertheless, there is every evidence that he is a loyal French patriot of the same type as his predecessor, and there is no question of pro- or anti-Americanism involved.

Thus there is little truth in tales now circulating here about "settling old scores" between pro-Soviet and pro-American cliques or doing away with nefarious double agents. Such rumors have been spread by persons at one or another time associated with S.D.E.C.E. who have got into a publicity contest, and the French opposition is trying to embarrass the regime.

Nevertheless, since the student uprisings of 1968, after which relations with America perceptibly improved, Paris and Washington have had excellent working relations even on the secret service level. Furthermore, the French are just as concerned with the drug problem as Americans are.

The present furor is a tempest in an opium pot. Once justice has taken its course, it will blow over. No deeper political implications are involved despite the best efforts of tale-spinners.