

NYTimes JAN 15 1973

An American De Gaulle?

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Politics is inseparable from ideas because an idea, no matter how flickering or ill-formed, must move through the mind of a statesman before he sets himself upon a course of action. It is therefore of more than idle interest that President Nixon seems to have patterned himself as a national leader upon that unlikely model, Charles de Gaulle.

At first glance, this intellectual relationship seems implausible. America is not France, and Richard Nixon, the highly controversial and almost rootless professional politician from Southern California, downtown Manhattan and Key Biscayne, Fla., has not had a career or historic role like that of Charles de Gaulle, who thought of himself as incarnating France, who saved her honor in 1948, liberated her soil in 1944, and rescued her freedom in 1958.

Yet what detached observers discern and individuals fantasy are not the same. Mr. Nixon, of course, has not publicly vouchsafed a sense of identity with General de Gaulle but Rowland Evans Jr. and Robert D. Novak report in their book, "Nixon in the White House": "There was in Nixon a vague identification with de Gaulle, founded on de Gaulle's humiliation after his postwar term of power and his glorious comeback in the midst of the Algerian crisis. Nixon, too, had suffered humiliation and turned it into a miraculous rebirth of personal power."

Vietnam has been Mr. Nixon's Algeria, making possible his return to power. De Gaulle took four years to extricate France from the unwinnable Algerian war; Mr. Nixon may be keeping to a similar time schedule in Vietnam.

It was to France that Mr. Nixon journeyed on his first Presidential trip abroad four years ago. In Paris, he offered de Gaulle public praise so lavish as to be embarrassing.

Like the great French leader, Mr. Nixon has reduced the weekly Presidential news conference to a semi-annual affair of state. He too appears before the press without notes on a podium. He too has kept aloof from most members of the national legislature and made himself a mysterious,

inaccessible figure even to members of his own Cabinet. He too is preoccupied with foreign trips and grand designs in world affairs. Of late, Mr. Nixon has announced that he intends to spend even more time at Camp David—his Colombey-les-Deux Eglises—there to brood in silence on his mountain-top and prepare fresh thunderbolts to startle the populace.

If the phrase were not so ugly, one would be tempted to describe this style of leadership as un-American. More precisely, it is monarchical. France has an ancient royal tradition, and General de Gaulle freely conceded in his memoirs that he tried to run the French Government as "a kind of monarchy." It was a style inappropriate to a modern, educated nation. It isolated de Gaulle from the currents of public feeling and thought as the May, 1968, rebellion and his sudden fall from power a year later demonstrated.

What proved not to be a viable mode of government for France and Charles de Gaulle is even more ill-suited to the much larger, more complex United States and to Richard Nixon, a figure of ~~few~~ smaller historic dimension. Mr. Nixon seems to feel that he can be a strong impressive national leader if he reorganizes the Government to concentrate power in the hands of himself and a few trusted intimates, if he overrides Congress, overawes the press and reshapes the judiciary to his philosophical taste.

But history shows that autocratic methods do not insure true strength. Secrecy magnifies the weaknesses it conceals. The concentration of power in a few hands means there are fewer opportunities to prevent error. The freedom to act unchecked is also largely an illusion. As the Vietnam bombing of recent weeks has demonstrated to his embarrassment and the nation's shame, an American President who refuses to consult his own Cabinet, defies the judgment of the Senate, ignores the criticism of the press, and is deaf to the anguish of the nation's clergy is, nevertheless, soon checked by the criticism of foreign leaders, foreign press and foreign demonstrations.

In reality, the need in recent years, as former Senator Eugene J. McCarthy and other thoughtful observers have pointed out, is for a "de-personalizing" of the Presidency. That does not mean substituting weakness for strength since firm leadership is always desirable. It does mean recasting the modern, powerful Presidency in more impersonal, more republican, more constitutionally responsible terms.

A President, after all, cannot govern a free people by becoming a lonely figure on a mountaintop in Maryland. His leadership is effective only as he

works effectively in concept with the many other institutions, private as well as public, which a free people have evolved to express their many-sided character and their diverse interests. His leadership reveals itself in his skill in liberating the people's own energies for good and in drawing, in Lincoln's words, upon the mystic chords of memory and hope to swell the chorus of the Union.

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