

Foreign Affairs: The Strategy of Error—II

By C. L. SULZBERGER

PARIS—It is possible to argue the greatest American weakness in Vietnam is the fact that the U.S.A. has never lost a war. Neither American political maturity nor American diplomacy has been tested by adversity as has the resilience of every other world power.

Were we forced to accept in Vietnam the kind of dishonorable solution that could be equated with defeat, chances are the kind of thing that happened to France after it abandoned its own struggle would be repeated with a quantum jump.

The Anticolonial War

Americans hastily remind themselves they are not fighting a colonial war with the hope of staying in Vietnam but, on the contrary, an anticolonial war, with the hope of getting out. Furthermore, France was at the end of its imperial tether; it was natural that defeat in Indochina should be echoed by defeat in North Africa. It was also natural that the agony in Algeria, a legal department of France, should embrace the metropole itself.

History, however, is sufficiently relentless to disregard legalistic distinctions. When it chooses to repeat itself, history eschews exactitude.

France's world position was immeasurably weakened by its Vietnamese defeat so soon after World War II and German occupation. What would happen to the U.S.A.'s infinitely stronger world position if it proved unable to handle the new kind of conflict, called "Revolutionary Warfare," mounted by a third-class power?

A Hard Question

"In the light of the Vietcong's re-emergence, how many of South Vietnam's neighbors are still impressed by the value of American protection?" inquires Persgrine Worzthorne, a notably pro-U.S. commentator of London's Daily and Sunday Telegraph. "Are they not more likely to be drawing the conclusion, after the events of the last three weeks, that the American giant is tragically unable—however willing—to succeed in guerrilla war, except at a price in destruction which makes no possible sense?"

The value of United States protection is being questioned not only in Asia but in Europe, where there has been growing worry about Washington's sincerity in promising to oppose any aggression even if this means subjecting American territory to the threat of nuclear destruction. Without an honorable Vietnam solution, Wash-

ington's international commitments will be questioned in all facets everywhere.

But the greatest threat would come at home, just as it did in France. When a fine French Army whose N.C.O.'s and officers had learned the methods of "Revolutionary Warfare" from their enemy, returned with its tail between its legs, it sought a scapegoat—France's society and Government.

The secret army organization (O.A.S.), led by Indochina veterans, fought Paris as well as the Algerian nationalists. It depended for its techniques, if not its philosophical aspirations, on what it had learned from the Vietminh (now Vietcong).

American public values and private virtues have already been dreadfully torn. Credibility of the Administration's word, doubts of a rising generation, increasingly ugly racial passions and the peace-keeping machinery in American cities have been brought to breaking point by the Vietnam catalyst.

What would now happen if an embittered army, the finest we have ever fielded, were brought home as the nation's first defeated force? Could some of its elements turn against those it held responsible?

Might not the unsolved race

question in United States cities prove to be America's "Algeria"? Would integrated United States soldiers who fought together so bravely on a foreign battlefield avoid the pressures exerted by frustration? Could they escape the passions of black power and white backlash? Would their recent experience with firearms discourage them from taking part in armed clandestine movements?

Our enemies call for "two, three, many Vietnams" inside the United States itself. This deliberate policy has already been embraced by some of our violent Negro leaders. Would this theorem wholly bypass a humiliated Army returning home?

Dread Virus

There is little reason to assume American society would prove so stable that it could accept the situation in tranquility. The distorted "Revolutionary Warfare" virus might well spread in the racially bewildered U.S.A. as it did in a France driven mad by Algeria.

Americans who with patent sincerity urge Washington to throw in the sponge should consider all possible implications of their counsel. Maybe, as I said in an earlier column, it is late to win in Vietnam; but it is also late to lose.