

But Britain Did Not Die at Yorktown

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By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON—Judging by the reaction of the educated Briton, the United States faces a crisis of confidence among her friends in Europe. The Cambodian invasion and its consequences have aggravated the long standing worry that America, in her obsession with Southeast Asia, will forget Europe. To that has been added a new uneasiness about the predictability and the judgment of the most powerful man in the world, the President.

But the deepest concern, among the many who love the United States, is with the state of the American people. Again and again the British—in Government and out, men and women—mention their fear at what is happening to our society.

Long-Term Phenomenon

Is the turmoil within the United States a result of passing trauma, or does it reflect some long-term historical phenomenon? The latter view is taken in a book to be published shortly in New York: "The End of the American Era," by Prof. Andrew Hacker of Cornell. It is an apocalyptic work.

According to Professor Hacker, America has begun a period of irreversible decline. It is "about to join other nations which were once prepossessing and are now little more than

plots of bounded terrain." Americans still believe in their country's world ascendancy, but that is finished.

The reason is a historical process by which a people grows powerful, then rich, then so selfish that individuals will no longer sacrifice for common concerns.

"The American temperament," Professor Hacker says, "has passed the point where self-interest can subordinate itself to citizenship. . . . Contemporary Americans simply do not want—and will not accept—political leadership that makes more than marginal demands on their emotions or energies. A society so inordinately attached to personal pursuits cannot be expected to renounce them just because social survival demands. . . ."

In Foreign policy, Professor Hacker sees two choices for the United States in the future.

One is to go on trying to "impose order in far-flung places of our choosing," using "men and money and materials to compensate for our declining moral conviction." But failure may frustrate us so much that we hit out wildly, abandoning diplomacy and risking unlimited war.

"The other option," Professor Hacker says, is for a majority of Americans "to admit that our nation is in a state of moral

enervation; that we have no more lessons to impart to others; that the way of life we have created has ceased to be a model for people beyond our borders; that we lack the will to carry out a worldwide mission of redemption and reform."

The English Experience

It is an arresting book, full of sharp insights and right in its basic judgment that unwillingness to spend for public needs is a main cause of our social decay. But are American idealism and generosity and public-spiritedness really forever finished? Professor Hacker would doubtless put this down to American optimism, but I think they need not be.

This history of nations does not always show a curve steadily rising and then falling. Other countries have had terrible periods and then recovered. England, for example, bled herself white in the Hundred Years' War in a futile attempt to keep French territory under the crown. And there was the American Revolution.

Correlli Barnett, an English military analyst, drew a parallel in a recent issue of *Horizons* between English feelings over the revolt of the American colonies and ours over Vietnam. George III and Lord North, he wrote, were "no less ironbound in their sense of righteousness

about the supremacy of crown and Parliament" than American Presidents in their commitment to Vietnam.

The British hawks of the day, sounding like a Pentagon briefing, dismissed the American rebels as "contemptible." But gradually British forces got bogged down on an alien continent, and discontent—even riots—flared at home. Anti-war politicians flourished.

At length the British gave up. Their sense of failure was acute. But what happened? Mr. Barnett says:

"Once the American war was liquidated, Britain's mood changed with astonishing speed. National hope and self-confidence were reborn. Instead of the decay and disintegration to which men had looked forward, Britain's greatest wealth, greatest power and greatest influence in the world were yet to come."

The parallel is far from exact. The world is an infinitely more dangerous place now than in 1783, and the responsibility of the United States infinitely greater than Britain's then. An end of the Vietnam war would still leave America with great social problems. But no one should underestimate the energies that would be released, the hopes reborn, the idealism renewed if we were to get out of Vietnam.