

Books of The Times

Arthur Schlesinger on Vietnam

By ELIOT FREMONT-SMITH

THE BITTER HERITAGE: Vietnam and American Democracy, 1941-1966. By Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. 126 pages. Houghton Mifflin. \$3.95.

AS one who is by profession an historian and has been by occasion a government official, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. writes in this eloquent, tough, dissenting book on the causes and effects of United States involvement in Vietnam, "I have long been fascinated and perplexed by the interaction between history and public decision: fascinated because, by this process, past history becomes an active partner in the making of new history; perplexed because the role of history in this partnership remains both elusive and tricky."

He notes that all decisions of public policy involve, explicitly or implicitly, historical judgment—a guess about the future derived from the interpreted experience of the past. But then he goes on to ask: "Is the history [explicitly] invoked really the source of policies, or is it the source of arguments designed to vindicate policies adopted for antecedent reasons?"

The question is, in the abstract, insoluble. "Moreover, even when history is in some sense the source of policies, the lessons of history are generally so ambiguous that the antecedent reasons often determine the choice between alternative historical interpretations. . . . Yet one cannot, on the other hand, reduce the function of history in public policy to that of mere rationalization, for historical models acquire a life of their own. Once a statesman begins to identify the present with the past, he may in time be carried further than he intends by the bewitchment of analogy."

These passages come in the middle of "Bitter Heritage," and they constitute its hard core. (The book is an extension of three articles—"A Middle Way Out of Vietnam," "On the Inscrutability of History" and "McCarthyism Is Threatening Us Again"—which were published last fall in, respectively, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Encounter* and *The Saturday Evening Post*.)

Mr. Schlesinger clearly believes that the historical analogies—principally that of Munich—invoked on behalf of our Vietnam policy are faulty and fraudulent rationalizations that have acquired a life of their own, grossly distorting our perception of the realities of our past and present involvement in Vietnam, and estranging us from our allies, from each other and, perhaps worst of all, from the future—the young, "who watch our course in Vietnam with perplexity, loathing and despair."

In his tracing of that erratic course, Mr. Schlesinger emphasizes that our present entanglement is not the result of any deliberate, planned policy or strategy, but came about, under three Presidents, through a series of small, stop-gap decisions—the kind of decisions, he notes, on which history is qualified to advise.

"is was," he writes, "the policy of 'one step'—each new step always promising success which the previous last step had promised but had unaccountably failed to deliver. . . . In retrospect, Vietnam is a case of the politics of inadvertence."

For the present—which he dates from the bombing of North Vietnam in February, 1965 ("the illusion that the war in

South Vietnam can be decided in North Vietnam is evidently a result of listening too long to our own propaganda")—he contends that we seem to be drifting ever further from the formulation of a frank and rational policy and its coherent application that alone can offer a reasonable political and military solution.

"New experiments in escalation are first denied, then disowned, then discounted and finally undertaken," he writes, and he foresees "an accelerating drift toward a great and unnecessary catastrophe," both in Vietnam and in our political life at home.

"The fear of a hopeless stalemate in Southeast Asia has produced a hunger for drastic solutions. It is not so much hawks vs. doves any longer as it is people becoming simultaneously hawks and doves and saying, like Senator [Richard B.] Russell that 'we should go in and win—or else get out.' Among the early casualties of this get-it-over-with frenzy are likely to be our national equability, good temper, moderation and reason."

Mr. Schlesinger would like to see us "recover our cool," as he puts it. In Vietnam, he would like to see an end to the bombing of the North, which he believes is evidently of little military value and utterly debilitating to our political aims and to any reasonable solution. He proposes a gradual and careful de-escalation in the South—a policy of clear and hold rather than find and kill—while a political way is found to discharge our very considerable and self-generated moral obligation to protect the lives of the South Vietnamese people.

In Washington, he would like to see a far greater discrimination in the use of power and an end to phony statistic, messianic rhetoric, shows of aggressiveness for home consumption ("Americans have become curiously insensitive to the use of military operations for domestic political purposes") and carrot-like notions of a Great Society for Asia, which he calls "sentimental imperialism," all too reminiscent of Kipling and the white man's burden. It is a burden, he suggests, that we cannot carry—will not be allowed to carry—and should not want; a burden that, if it does not lead to nuclear disaster, will assure our defeat in Asia and our isolation from our friends, and pose the most serious of threats to democracy at home.

End Papers

THERE WAS A PRESIDENT. By N.B.C. News. Illustrated. 158 pages. Ridge Press/Random House. \$2.95.

For 70 hours and 30 minutes, from Friday, Nov. 22, through Monday, Nov. 25, 1963, America watched and listened to television and radio. The reporting of the assassination of President Kennedy and the events that followed it appalling in Dallas, profoundly moving in Washington, was unquestionably broadcasting's greatest moment. This book, however, is not; if anything, it diminishes the achievement. It is, in effect, a commercial souvenir program, exclusively devoted to the efforts of a single company. The sense of promotional advertising, so bizarre in this case, is emphasized by the lack of annotation, which makes the book of little other obvious use, and no improvement over the picture books published early in 1964.

—E. F.-S.