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Senator McCarthy's Foreign Policy

THE LIMIT OF POWER, by Eugene J. McCarthy. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, N.Y. $5.95.

Senator Eugene J. McCarthy of Minnesota is no fool; nor is he a reckless politician.

That such a man, regarded by his Senate colleagues as ambitious and unprincipled, but deeply cautious, has begun to challenge the President says something about the protest movement — but a great deal more about the evolution of intrinsically conservative feelings in the American electorate.

We have reached the stage where politicians who think of the longer term future recognize it is not only feasible to oppose the war, but that they must do so if they are to be responsive to the stirrings of both the young and the great center group of the uncommitted.

This is not to demean McCarthy, who is a principled man, as political men go, although he waited long time after Senators Morse, Gruening and Fulbright had broken the ice). In fact, most great empires — and America is surely one — which do not destroy themselves in the vain pursuit of the impossible reach such a stage in their political historie.

America's empire is not a series of colonies but a global array of nations dominated, informally and inexorably, by overwhelming American economic, military or CIA power. It is based at least in theory on the liberal ideals of "free world" open trade and democracy.

McCarthy's new book — the kind of book a Senator writes when he is thinking about being Secretary of State, not President — does not use the word empire, but it argues that, like the other mature empires, we must also begin to limit commitments.

Vietnam, the most pressing case, is only an example of the general problem: American power is not total, costs must be weighed against gains, we must make a careful reckoning of how to cut losses and re-establish priorities in foreign policy.

This is the stance of the enlightened conservative; and McCarth's plea is "prudence," the plea of the true conservative.

This was the plea of De Gaulle when France confronted her second Vietnam in Algeria. And it was the plea of British Prime Ministers who since Suez have recognized the "winds of change," as Macmillan did in South Africa.

McCarthy thus is best understood as part of the leadership [illegible] Establishment of our informal empire — but a part which, enlightened, sees much to lose in our current course.

And middle class America appears, like France ten years ago, as a deeply conservative nation struggling against her own powerful tendency to radical military policies — policies which attempt dangerously to extend, not conserve her international position.

Instead of pursuing hopeless objectives, McCarthy urges less direct U.S. involvement; we should work more with international or multi-national agencies. And we should be less willing to use military influence through the distribution and sale of arms, and less willing to follow the interventionist advice of the Central Intelligence Agency.

In Europe, he advocates moderation and detente, coming close, in fact, to De Gaulle's own approach.

He suggests that in Asia we recognize China has made a great deal of noise but is not in practice much of a threat to her neighbors or to the United States.

In both Britain and France, enlightened conservative attempts to draw back from the folly of over-commitment split the political base of the governing party. Whether McCarthy's efforts will open the way for a Reagan or a Nixon, or whether they will simply build the Senator's image in general, or pave the way for himself or Robert Kennedy in the Presidency, with McCarthy then possibly Secretary of State, are immediate questions, but they are not the fundamental ones.

More crucial is whether the enlightened view sufficiently reflects America's underlying conservatism so that it can become the longer term policy of both political parties. If so, future Vietnams in Asia, Latin America or Africa may perhaps be prevented.

And there are the basic questions, which McCarthy does not address but which we will ultimately have to face: why does America, under both Democratic and Republican administrations, so regularly find itself making commitments in support of reaction around the world — and how can we end the policies which lead to such commitments instead of merely limiting the cost of the commitments once made.

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