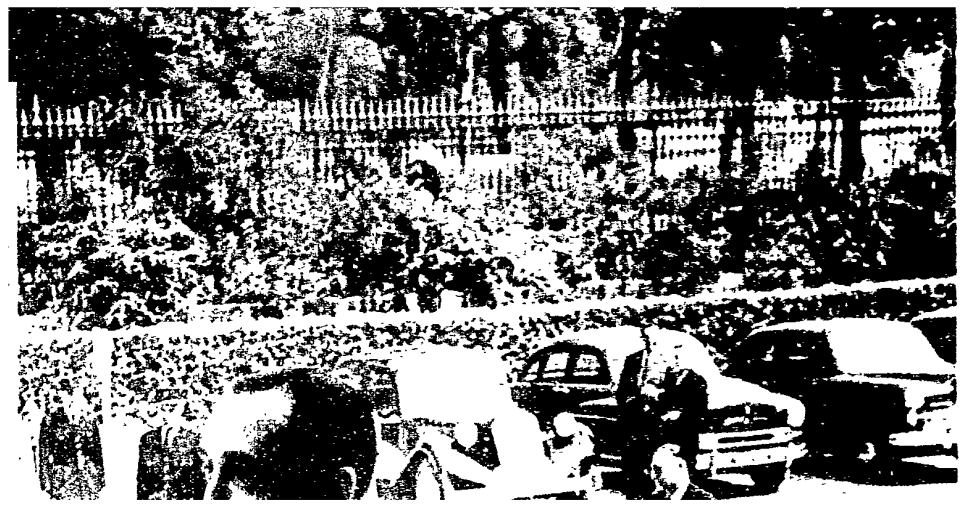
France's Premier -- And Salesman
By BLAIR CLARKPARIS.
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France's Premier —And Salesman

Here is a close-up of the man who has baffled, irritated and impressed the world.





France's Premier, with Mme. Mendes-France—"Few French leaders have inspired such passionate admiration or such profound hatred."

By BLAIR CLARK

PARIS.

FRENCH Premier Pierre Mendès-France arrives in America this week as the salesman of a new France and of himself as its leader. For six days this economist-turned-statesman who, in his five months in office, has baffled, irritated and impressed the world's diplomats, and who promises something like a political and economic revolution at home, will submit himself to the scrutiny of the American public.

Behind him he leaves a record that even his numerous enemies have to admit is dynamic. No French leader since General de Gaulle has drawn from Frenchmen such passionate admiration or such profound hatred; no one has inspired such extravagant hopes or such profound suspicions.

For M. Mendès-France, who has not had a full day off since he was voted into office June 18, his American sojourn will be practically a rest cure, crowded though it is with official visits, dinners, receptions and public speeches. (He speaks English more fluently than any French Premier since the war.) One or two of his assistants, in fact, worn out by his 100-hour weeks, tried to come with him to America to catch up on sleep. The Premier coolly told them all to stay on the job in Paris.

A driving pace has been Mendès-France's all his life. And it has served him well in his double job as Premier and Foreign Minister during this past summer and autumn when the Western world's diplomatic calendar has been spectacularly crowded.

THE character of Pierre Mendès-France is complex. He is not a "warm" person. A Deputy in the Parliament since 1932, he is perhaps on familiar terms with no more than half a dozen of his colleagues. Courteous but distant is the standard description of his manner.

He can be icily cutting, but he never loses his temper with his subordinates. He can make his displeasure keenly felt while maintaining his reserve. His associates sometimes telephone one another to check on his mood before taking up a problem with him face to face. They have come to prefer his one-page memo style of working to the personal confrontation.

He is what the French call *un homme à tiroirs,* which means that he keeps his problems, his thoughts and his reactions very much to himself. Those who know him best say he is solitary rather than lonely. He and his charming wife have never had much to do with the dazzling Paris society to which they had easy access, and it has been his choice to avoid it. He is solitary even in his policy decisions. His is truly a one-man Government. His Cabinet and his staff are not there to advise him on policy but to get him the factual basis for decisions and then to supervise their execution.

THE intense concentration of M. Mendès-France on the job to be done made him forget some of the usual diplomatic niceties in the past summer of international conferences. At Brussels in August, for example, he came close to maddening the delegates from the other five nations that were to join the European Defense Community by the blunt forthrightness of his language and by his bland insistence that his own parliamentary problem on E. D. C. was all that counted.

When it came to the London Conference to pick up the pieces of the shattered E. D. C., British official admiration for this new French phenomenon, for this decisive and forceful French Premier, sagged sharply from the heights it had reached when Sir Anthony Eden and Pierre Mendès-France were the joint architects of the Indochina settlement at Geneva.

The low point was reached right after the British decision to turn over four divisions and an air force to the new Western European Command. France had been seeking such a British commitment for years. Previous French Premiers had said that with it they could easily get the E. D. C. treaty through the French Parliament. But Mendès-France acknowledged the British concession in the most cursory way and went right on to demand acceptance for his highly unpopular arms pool idea.

The Foreign Ministers of the Western world have learned at least to respect the technical competence and hard bargaining of Mendès-France, whatever they may think of his diplomatic manners. He is a formidable man around a conference table, as he has been for years in parliamentary debate or in his successful private law practice.

OBSERVERS of the workings of his mind in and out of office say that Mendès-France has the classic Cartesian approach to problems: he may "doubt and go on doubting until no doubt is left." But when the final doubt has been resolved, then a course of action is adopted and followed to its logical end. When Mendès-France has solved a problem in his own way and adopted a policy it is as if he had written after the solution "Q. E. D."

His powerful and lucid mind is at its best in debate. It seems far superior in the give and take of Assembly debates than it is in a formal speech in *(Continued on Page 30)*

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Premier And Salesman

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which he drily expounds a subject.

He can be absolutely devastating when he contradicts or corrects the statements of an opponent, withering the hapless enemy with the clarity of his reasoning and, above all, with the precision of his facts. In the historic debate of Aug. 29, for example, in which the French Assembly killed E.D.C., he was being powerfully attacked by former Premier Rene Mayer, who charged that one of the protocols Mendès-France had fought for at Brussels would have given Germany a veto over the sending of French troops to North Africa. Without looking at his notes, Mendès-France coldly interrupted Mayer to point out that this contingency had been foreseen and forestalled by a protocol which had been negotiated while Mayer himself was Premier. "The case is covered," said Mendès-France, "by the protocol of March 24, 1953, which you know better than anyone."

It is a bold and thoroughly prepared Deputy who dares to challenge Mendès-France in debate and feel confident of the outcome.

A BRIEF review of Mendès-France's life story provides some clues to his character. For one thing, he has been precocious all his life. Born in Paris on Jan. 11, 1907, to Orthodox Jewish parents, he won his baccalaureate degree at 15. This is roughly equal to completing two years at an American college.

He went on from there to study law and economics simultaneously, and at 21—another record—he won his doctorate of law with a thesis on the fiscal policies of Raymond Poincaré. This effort won him the compliment of a critical reply from the great economic stabilizer himself who remarked that the young author was "not yet a Deputy; his views are therefore impartial."

Poincaré's prediction of a political career for Mendès-France did not take long to come true. At 25 Mendès-France ran for election in the Normandy Department of Eure on the Radical Socialist party ticket. (The French say, of course, that this party is neither radical nor socialist). He won and became the youngest Deputy. Six years later the Socialist Leon Blum brought Mendès-France into the short-lived Government of 1938 as Deputy Finance Minister, once more a record for youth.

ANOTHER aspect of Mendès-France is his toughness. He showed it during World War II, as he has since. First, he served as an officer-observer in the French Air Corps and after the defeat of 1940 he

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made his way to North Africa. There a Vichy court used him as an example and tried him for "internal desertion in time of war," in other words, for preferring to leave conquered France.

It is characteristic of Pierre Mendès-France that he spent some of his eight months in prison reasoning out a legal excuse for escaping and the rest planning his escape. After the war, he was not content with the total discrediting of the Vichy regime. He appealed his conviction for desertion, and, after his case had wended its way through the French judicial system, the judgment of the Vichy court was reversed just a month before he became Premier.

AFTER his wartime escape he joined the French Underground, got to England and took part in bombing raids on Germany and, painfully for him among others, on Occupied France.

A third point about Mendès-France—his single-mindedness—was pretty well established right after the war, when he left the de Gaulle Government which he had joined two years earlier.

In 1943, General de Gaulle called Mendès-France to Algiers to become Commissioner of Finance in the Free French Government. He remained with the Government until, in late 1945, he made his big break with post-war French economic policy. Mendès-France wanted France to choose the hard way of austerity, and he imposed political exile on himself when the choice was made for the easier way of inflation.

Although General de Gaulle headed the Goverment when Mendès-France made his break, the two men have remained on good terms—intimacy is equally alien to the nature of each. General de Gaulle probably respects the Premier more than he does any other French politician.

NOT long after M. Mendès-France's self-exclusion, General de Gaulle himself retired from power. But the wartime leader of Free France broke with the system itself, not with a policy, and this is an essential difference between them. Mendès-France's name is attached to no scheme for a drastic revision of French political institutions, and his bitterest enemies have not accused him of not being a good democrat, even a good parliamentary democrat.

This does not mean that Mendès-France has not borrowed some of de Gaulle's political ideas. For instance, the Premier favors and has used de Gaulle's principle of "the bursting of the parties," the systematic attempt to wean Deputies from their party leaderships into a Government of national union.

Mendès-France's effort to explode the hidebound French party system is still far from a complete success. His popularity in the country greatly exceeds his support in the Parliament. A recent public opinion poll showed that 50 per cent of the French people chose him as the post-war Premier who had done most for France. There were 11 per cent for the closest rival, Antoine Pinay.

The need to gather popular support to overcome party hostility has led Mendès-France to make regular radio reports to the French people, along the lines of Franklin D. Roosevelt's fireside chats. For this, and because Mendès-France has considered setting up a Ministry of Youth, he has been charged with demagogy.

The care with which Mendès-France prepares and rehearses his radio speeches to the nation is typical of his attack on any problem. After recording his talk, he listens to playbacks and will then frequently re-record passages that do not sound right to him. Even after that, he insists on listening to himself on the radio. Once he missed the broadcast when an assistant got stuck in an elevator with the radio set. The Premier was furious.

PREMIER'S WIFE

Madame Mendès-France, who will accompany her husband on his trip to the United States, knows this country well: she spent the war years here. She is the former Lily Cicurel, daughter of Egypt's leading department store merchant. Her avocation is painting, mostly portraits and still-lifes, some of which have appeared at Paris' Salon d'Automne. M. and Mme. Mendès-France have two sons, aged 18 and 20, both in college.

ALTHOUGH Mendès-France came to power on a foreign policy issue, ending the Indochina war, his main goal is to restore France to economic health, to make her self-sufficient and independent of United States aid. But events have dictated that foreign policy should be his inescapable preoccupation since he took office.

It is perhaps not too brutal to put the doubts about his intentions in this field in the form of the question: "Will Mendès-France, with his obsession for renovating France, decide that this can only be done by making some kind of deal with Russia which will permit France to put her 'unproductive' military investment to work on the home front?"

To this question his friends answer with a categorical no. They point to his repeated statements that the Atlantic Alliance is the keystone of French policy. And they quote his statement on "the fundamental error of the so-called neutralist thesis * * * no imaginable policy could enable us

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to escape if, unhappily, a new war were to break out."

The idea of a Third Force is a different thing, according to these same supporters. This notion of a strong Europe, capable of mediating between the twin colossi of Russia and America, has long appealed to him. But this, say his friends, is the farthest thing from neutralism or the appeasement of the Soviet Union.

THERE is no question, though, that Mendès-France will be relieved when he can devote most of his attention to France's economic problems. For years, his favorite, indeed, almost his only reading has been in economics. Foreign economists who got to know him when for four years he was France's delegate to the United Nations Economic and Social Council, say that his knowledge of economics is impressive. They regard him as one of a handful of competent modern French economists, equipped with all the theoretical and practical tools of the Keynesian school and with a deep understanding of the Government's role in influencing a country's economic life.

On the few steps the Premier has taken since the National Assembly this summer gave him wide decree powers to revamp the French economy, he has been criticized, according to his critics' political optic, for too little and for too much state intervention. Some observers think he will go no farther and move no faster than the political realities permit him.

His friends believe the main threats to his tenure of office lie in France's current North African troubles, for which he would be blamed on the grounds that he had provoked them by instituting modest reforms in the direction of self-government, or in the recurrent conflict over state support for Roman Catholic schools, an issue that has repeatedly twisted the French political fabric out of shape.

AMERICANS judging Pierre Mendès-France at first hand might consider one revealing obsession he had when, last year, it began to look as if his long period of exile might end and he might return to power on his own terms. It was an obsession with the career of Kerensky in Russia, whose democratic regime in 1917 gave way before the Communists and has since become the symbol of ineffective "liberal" action leading to the totalitarian darkness.

Above all else, Mendès-France is determined that he will not be France's Kerensky.

"In office," says one of Mendès-France's friends, "he has shown a genius for action I never suspected he had. The mainspring of his actions is a determination to make a democratic system work."

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