The Role of Nasser
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An attempt to restore tarnished prestige abroad and divert attention from critical economic problems at home led Gamal Abdel Nasser into the military misadventure that now has brought his own political future into question. Whether or not he goes ahead with yesterday's resignation, the personal appeal of Egypt's President undoubtedly has been undermined. Fifteen years of his "revolutionary" leadership clearly has led Egypt down a dead-end street.

The irony about Colonel Nasser's current predicament is that it was Israel's defeat of the Arabs in 1948 that led his young officers' movement to seize power a few years later, ousting a corrupt and inefficient monarchy. Egypt's President sought and obtained more than $1 billion of Soviet arms to reverse the military balance. But Soviet backing, in turn, has twice led him seriously to overreach himself, bringing him in 1956 and again this week to repetitions of the military defeat he originally sought power to expunge.

The young officers Nasser led to power did not originally intend to wipe out the memory of the Arab defeat of 1948 by military means. These "effendis in uniform" reflected the views of the educated youth of the middle class, more interested in restoring Egypt's self-respect through domestic reform and modernization than in "another round" with Israel. But their early talk of making peace with Israel vanished as the recalcitrance of domestic problems led Nasser to turn to foreign adventure and an effort to seize leadership of the Arab world through a combination of anti-Western and anti-Israel slogans.

The result, it now is clear, has been failure both at home and abroad. Huge military expenditures and an inconclusive four-year military campaign in Yemen have helped to bring inflation in Egypt and diversion of resources from development. The second Five-Year Plan has had to be extended to seven years, then abandoned. More than a third of the productive capacity of Government-owned factories stands idle for lack of funds to buy imported components and parts.

Whether Nasser stays or goes now is of little importance compared to the policies Egypt's leadership group, made up largely of present and former army officers, intends to pursue. Continued adventure abroad and a serious effort to come to grips with problems at home clearly are not compatible. What is not clear is whether Egypt's leaders have yet learned that vital lesson.

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