Vanquished
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Vanquished

A Woeful Miscalculation

A mocking joke made the rounds of Cairo's foreign community last Friday. Field Marshal Abdel Hakim Amer, deputy supreme commander of the United Arab Republic's armed forces, met President Gamal Abdel Nasser, according to the story, on the way to the mosque. An old friend of Mr. Nasser's, Marshal Amer is supposed to have said, "Well, Gamal, you can't win them all."

The anecdote, with its implied question as to how Mr. Nasser would survive this blow to his fortunes, gained further point the same day when the Egyptian leader went through what seemed to be a classic grandstand play to refurbish his suddenly tarnished image.

In a radio and television speech to the people he admitted "a grave setback," which he explained by repeating his charges of American and British air support for Israel —charges broadcast by Cairo and Damascus during the fighting and angrily denied by Washington and London. He then declared, "I am ready to assume the entire responsibility. I have decided to give up completely and finally every official post and return to the ranks of the public."

But in the evening, after crowds surged through Cairo's blacked-out streets chanting "We want Nasser," he said he was "deeply moved" and would review his decision. The Assembly, a part of his own edifice of "measured democracy," thereupon voted not to accept his resignation and Mr. Nasser said he was bowing to "the will of the people" and would stay on as President.

Mr. Nasser's maneuvering suggested that the political effects of the military debacle were bearing down strongly on the Nasser Government. There were rumors that Mr. Nasser's chief aides were dividing in this moment of truth into a pro-Soviet faction and a faction favoring moderation and a détente with the United States. That Mr. Nasser in his resignation speech should have named Vice President Zakariya Mohieddine—a reputed moderate—as his successor suggested that he was seeking to safeguard his regime, if not his personal exercise of power, by appeasing Egypt's more conservative elements. But can even he hold back pressures for change when Egypt begins paying the costs of his failure in brinkmanship?

Militarily, it was already clear even from Cairo that the United Arab Republic had lost much of

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the arsenal of planes and armor that it had so pridefully accrued from the Soviet bloc. Whether and how it can replenish its arsenal was an open question.

Cairo's aspirations to seize Palestine back for the Arabs seemed as spent as the army trucks that broke down in Cairo last month when Mr. Nasser was sending convoys through the capital on their way to his military build-up in Sinai. It appeared most unlikely that the U.A.R. would be in a position to undertake large-scale hostilities against Israel

Economically, last week's fighting has been damaging as well. No precise figures were available, but independent economic analysts in Cairo said the war cost the U.A.R. millions of dollars in badly needed foreign exchange.

Loss of Canal Tolls

The disruption of traffic through the Suez Canal cost toll revenues that are Cairo's greatest single source of foreign exchange. The fighting cost dearly in petroleum products that the U.A.R. had imported itself or, conversely, could have exported to earn foreign exchange. And economic analysts in Cairo predicted that the International Monetary Fund now will be most hesitant about making foreign exchange available to the U.A.R., which had asked for its help last year.

All this is of the greatest importance to the U.A.R. because Cairo must make heavy imports of grain and flour each year to feed its population, which grows by a million mouths a year. If the U.A.R. lacks the foreign exchange to buy bread for its people, it must, one way or another, answer to the will of those countries willing to provide it on other terms, notably the United States and the Soviet Union.

Finally, there was the political effect of the war that Mr. Nasser was so quick to take account of. The troops deployed in Cairo slouched at their posts, dreaming under the pale desert sun. The civilian population seemed calm, but troubled knots of men were gathered in the coffee houses listening to their transistor radios.

The Egyptian masses have always been apathetic, attuned to the slow rhythm of the rise and fall of the Nile. They are not likely to endanger the power of President Nasser. Western observers felt that if a threat to his Government materializes in a reaction to the debacle on the Sinai peninsula, it is likeliest to come from the officers corps.

Arab Reaction

What of the effect on Mr. Nasser's standing elsewhere in the Arab world?

A Western correspondent in Beirut chanced on a Palestinian Arab weeping in an office where he had access to news dispatches from abroad. He lifted his head from his arms and said, "Nasser will do something. The Arabs cannot fail." Then he dropped his head again, unconvinced himself.

In the same city, a Palestinian Christian said: "I hope they get him and wreck him in Cairo. If they do I will light candles at the church. He has ruined my country's chances. He wanted to be the 'Big Arab' and he risked world war to do it, but he hasn't helped us, he has wrecked us."

But in the streets of Beirut, and of Baghdad, Kuwait and other Arab cities, Mr. Nasser's decision to stay on was greeted by joyous mass demonstrations, according to the Cairo and Beirut radios. And King Hussein of Jordan, who had switched from enmity toward Mr. Nasser to alliance with him on the eve of the six-day war, sent him a message saying the Arab world needed his leadership in the battles ahead.

Among the Arabs, they say, nothing fails like failure. But old saws don't always hold up. The full effect of Mr. Nasser's failure is yet to be gauged.

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