Enigmatic De Gaulle Leads French Policy

By BILL McGRATH

The birth of the Fifth French Republic has been far less dramatic than that of any of its four predecessors. Indeed one must stretch the meaning of the word revolution to make it applicable to the demonstrations and political manoeuvres which brought General De Gaulle to power last May.

Even so there is some reason to hope that the relative calm with which the Fourth Republic was laid to rest may be the factor which allows the new government to be a success.

The Pendulum Swings
For instance the pendulum of French political life seems to have come to rest somewhere between the extremes of anarchic democracy and authoritarianism (although it should be noted that it is perceptibly closer to the latter than to the former).

The Left Wing
The "left wing" of French political opinion and most of the moderate parties supported the constitution only because they felt that if De Gaulle were rejected the country would fall into the hands of the rabid army leaders who initiated the "revolution" in Algeria.

For De Gaulle
There can be little doubt that the new constitution is personally designed for De Gaulle. The President of the Fifth Republic will be endowed with very extensive powers including the right to nominate the premier, the right to dissolve the General Assembly in order to hold new elections, and the right in an emergency to take any actions necessary to save "the institutions of the republic." It is this last power, expressed in article 16, which has excited so many fears in the minds of democratic Frenchmen.

Dangerous Clause
While De Gaulle is generally trusted not to abuse this power it is feared that some future president may take advantage of this clause to convert the country into a dictatorship. It is the definite danger of this clause which gives De Gaulle such a heavy responsibility for building up in his administration a stable democratic tradition that future presidents will not dare violate.

Stability Needed
Threatening this vital need for stability, however, will be all the problems which the Fourth Republic left unsolved. These include a serious financial crisis, the problem of European integration, and most importantly, the explosive Algerian problem. So far De Gaulle has evaded this issue but the rising terrorism of the Algerian nationalists leaves little doubt that something must be done at once. A just, lasting solution to this problem will be very difficult to arrive at but the demise of the Fourth Republic proves that it must be done.

A Favorable Sign
One favorable sign in this last respect is the stand De Gaulle has taken in the matter of the future of the French colonies. The new constitution offers any colony the right to independence at any time in the future when a majority of its people favor it. This bold choice of friendly economic and cultural co-operation instead of forcible domination is a heartening new element in French colonial policy.

Viewing De Gaulle's position as a whole, one receives a rather mixed impression. There are definitely some ominous signs in the new constitution, but also there are some hopeful signs as in the new colonial policy. Dominating both these categories there remains the great unsolved problem of Algeria.

An Enigmatic Personality
The one thing of which we can be reasonably certain at this point is that for the near future the French have entrusted their destiny to the enigmatic personality of Charles De Gaulle and that if he manages to solve these problems while maintaining French democracy, he will have earned an unrivalled position in French history.