

Thurs. Dec. 18/86

Reopening old wounds

The huge student demonstrations and riots that occurred last week in Paris were a grim reminder that mob rule still remains the bogeyman of French political life. A half-million angry demonstrators revived frightening memories of the last student uprising in 1968 that brought down the imperial government of Charles DeGaulle and very nearly plunged France into civil war.

Looking at today's prosperous, well-fed France, with its high-tech industries and nuclear forces, one easily forgets that beneath this *soignée* facade, behind the current "cohabitation" between the parties of right and left, wide rifts still remain in the French political landscape. Buried deep in the French psyche is the nightmare of the 1870 Paris Commune uprising, when left and right fought for control of a city besieged by the Prussians.

During the bloody uprising whole parts of Paris were barricaded by the leftists. Both sides butchered one another's captives with a ferocity not shown even to the Prussian enemy. Finally, the right prevailed and its firing squads executed thousands of leftists. Many fell in Paris' Pere Lachaise Cemetery and here, each year, the united left still renders homage to its fallen heroes.

So whenever large political demonstrations erupt in Paris, everyone immediately recalls the Commune. The divisions between left and right are still jagged and cutting; the recourse to violence between the parties far too frequent and accepted. Nor have many Frenchmen forgotten the grim days of World War II when France really did have a civil war between the rightist supporters of the Vichy regime and the leftist backers of the Resistance. These memories remain open wounds.

Also, it must be said, few nationalities know how to riot like the French. I recall the terror of being

ERIC MARGOLIS



caught in Paris riots where police used their natty blue capes — with strips of lead sewn into the hems — like scythes to mow down ranks of demonstrators. Or, for that matter, the professional rioters with their helmets, gas masks and iron bars.

To deal with such nasty toughs, the French have a special riot police, known as the CRS, or Republican Security Companies, a highly professional group of thugs and head-breakers who just love to bash left-wing rioters. The CRS is a sort of elite commando force for the government, to be sent in when the regular police and the special riot police can't hold the line.

As Paris riots go, however, last week's were almost bloodless: Only one student was killed. Still, the new Conservative government of Premier Jacques Chirac took evident fright and quickly — some said foolishly — backed down on imposing a series of acts designed to liberalize France's highly socialized economy and school system. The government, it seemed, was not ready to go head to head with the student left.

In the midst of this scare, President François Mitterrand not only stabbed his cohabitation partner Chirac in the back, but once again showed that the French left, for all its efforts to appear well-behaved and bourgeois, has never renounced street violence as a political weapon. Just as Chirac was trying to head off a replay of 1968, Mitterrand declared that he "understood" and "sympathized" with the rioters.

This was the last thing the embattled Chirac needed to hear and no doubt heavily influenced his decision to give in to student demands.

From afar, the riots and their political aftermath may not appear particularly noteworthy. Big demonstrations are as much a part of European life as soccer. But this time there was a striking difference. The brief era of co-operation in governing France between right and left appears to have just ended. Moderation is the true victim of the Paris riots.

One may now expect to see a sharp radical shift by France's left and the prospect of more street violence. What also seems evident is that younger men much to the left of Mitterrand are now hotly seeking the leadership of the socialist left. No one yet knows for sure whether Mitterrand will resign next year, as he has hinted, but the scramble for power is now on. The trendy, artsy leftist, Jack Lange, the type of socialist produced by our own cultural bureaucracy is, unfortunately for France, leading in the race to succeed Mitterrand.

Speculators are betting the French franc will start to drop, canny Frenchmen are again stashing money abroad, and the CRS is restocking tear gas. France is never a dull nation.

Berry's World



"How do you want to finance this?"