P.S. to the NEWS
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WAR AND POLITICS

"U.S. Would Go To War For Pakistan" proclaimed three-column headlines after Zbigniew Brzezinski finalized his discussions with Pakistani leaders earlier this month. If the Soviets advance toward the Persian Gulf, "this means war," announced Administration spokesman Clark Clifford after his conferences in India.

Meanwhile, Defense Secretary Harold Brown told U.S. News that it is "important to be able to move ground-combat forces in very quickly" to the Persian Gulf.

Russian authorities, assessing these official U.S. statements, have concluded that the Carter Administration wants a "confrontation" with the Soviets and is precipitating a "brinkmanship policy." It is difficult to fault that conclusion.

Some explain the shift in Carter's policy by his being "born again" to the belief that Communists are bad guys, after all. The shift in the Carter policy might also be disagnosed as patent political pragmatism in a presidential election year that will determine Carter's place in history.

There used to be a popular Chicago politician whose perennial campaign slogan was, "I'm going to punch King George in the snoot." Again and again, the anti-British Irish reelected the politician who "ran against" King George.

Political strategists know that war, or even the threat of war, tends to unify the nation in favor of the incumbent. Out comes the hoary slogan, "Don't change horses in the middle of the stream."

The fear of an unknown future, an uncertain policy, or an untested leader rises to the top of voters' emotions like cream in a bottle. Forgotten is the question of how mismanagement put us in the middle of the raging stream, defenseless and off course.

Magicians ply their trade by making the audience watch one hand while the other is consummating the trick. Presidents and rulers who are over their heads in economic problems they cannot solve (inflation, unemployment, recession) often turn to war, or the threat of war, to distract public attention.

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So Carter's call for reinstatement of registration for the draft has been generally applauded, even by the same sources which decisively defeated the same proposal in the House as recently as last September. His call for increased defense spending has brought only a ho-hum from sources which, just before Christmas, were ready to filibuster a single billion dollar's rise.

Political pundits are opining that Carter's "handling" of the Iranian hostage crisis and his "strong" response to Soviet troops in Afghanistan are responsible for his dramatic recovery in the public opinion polls. It is easy for superficial strategists to deduce that, if jawboneing the Russians could jump Carter 30 poll points over Ted Kennedy, it can do likewise when Carter is pitted against his Republican opponent after the National Nominating Conventions.

Peeking around the corner is the additional possibility that Brezhnev will assist Carter's reelection by withdrawing half or a third of the Soviet troops in Afghanistan. That would cost the Kremlin nothing because a corporal's guard of Russian troops, armed with modern weapons, can easily stay on top of the scattered Afghan freedom fighters, armed only with hand-forged World War I-type rifles.

The trouble with this line of reasoning is, first, that Carter's Iowa defeat of Kennedy is no proof of anything except that the balloon of Kennedy's invincibility was finally punctured to release the hot air that it always contained. There never was any evidence that the American voters (outside of Massachusetts) are willing to accept "ABC" even packaged in the Kennedy good looks. ("ABC" stands for Appeasement or Abortion-funding, Big-government spending programs, and Chappaquiddick.)

The second trouble with the illusion that Carter's sabre-rattling is the key to political success is that a battle of words with the Soviets is a phony test of power in the real world. To recall another applicable adage, the Kremlin knows that "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me."

In poker, in street fights, in politics and in war, it is a dangerous game to make threats without the relevant power to deliver if the opponent calls your bluff. The Soviets called Carter's bluff about their combat troops in Cuba. We hope the Kremlin doesn't call Carter's bluff about war in the Persian Gulf or Pakistan.

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