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Nixon's Approach To the Chinese

IN A 1968 INTERVIEW, Richard Nixon said that the President he admired most in this century was Woodrow Wilson. "Wilson had the greatest vision of America's world role. But he wasn't practical enough. Take his open agreements openly arrived at. That is not the way diplomacy is conducted. The Vietnamese war, for instance, will be settled at secret, high-level negotiations."

It was clear, even then, that Nixon did not have in mind secret sessions in Paris (though Kissinger still thought in those terms at the time). Nixon's plan to end the war in Vietnam—one was to make it part of a high-level renegotiation of world positions. And that meant direct dealings with Moscow. Nixon was interested in the big picture, not in a merely ad hoc response to Vietnam.

But Moscow would not play, and Nixon felt he had to keep the pressure on in Vietnam. To get high-level talks started, China was a second choice, because a direct approach seemed less likely to succeed. But for many purposes China is an even better place for Nixon to begin the kind of world settlement he envisages. For one thing, friendship with China will presumably increase Russia's caution and willingness to play.

The kind of approach was very risky—an "all or nothing" approach. It meant Nixon could not settle for an easy quick solution to part of the problem (e.g., in Vietnam). But now that the approach seems to be paying off, the parts fall into place. The rationale of the war disappears, if we do not fear China and its domino-topping advance. Also, there are new reasons for Saigon to be less intransi-

gent on a peace agreement.

It must have been the happiest time in Nixon's life, these last weeks, playing chess at long distance with China itself, exploring all the possibilities, disposing of the world (by anticipation) in the privacy of his intimately experienced powers.

And there lies the danger. All-or-nothing diplomacy at

the very top is a matter of taking big risks, facing the possibility of failure or rebuke, humiliation or setback—all felt as a direct affront to the President, who embodies America in a personal and very sensitive way.

We saw what this meant at the time of the U-2 crisis, when Khrushchev was able to humiliate Eisenhower in Paris, on the very eve of their personal conference. Eisenhower was a man very secure in himself, not feeling any need to "prove things"—he absorbed the humiliation with a face-saving graciousness.

But things can easily go the other way, as we saw during the Cuban missile crisis. President Kennedy felt that he had given an impression of weak immaturity during his Vienna meeting with Khrushchev. He did have to "prove himself"—so he was willing to go to the brink of nuclear war to remove a few missiles that would almost immediately be cruising closer to our shores on Russian subs.

National security was not at issue in Cuba, except as national security gets (all too easily) equated with national prestige—and as that prestige gets (even more easily) equated with the personal pride of a President who has taken risks and made initiatives, and committed his dignity.

Presidents who go out on a limb, all alone—whether Wilson at Versailles, Roosevelt at Yalta, Eisenhower on the way to Paris, or Kennedy in Vienna—better have poise, security, and resilience; be incapable of easy "loss of face"; and they must be able to "deliver" in terms of national support for whatever they do.

Personal diplomacy involves all the personal strengths and weaknesses of its principals. Admirers of the President will find comfort in that fact. But some other Americans must be keeping their fingers crossed.