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# Trying the "Tryers Out" Approach in Peking

PEKING, China—It is usually a mistake to back into an important subject. Yet a significant part of my absorbing experience here can be best explained by a somewhat ribald story about Catherine the Great of Russia.

In her later years, Catherine's famous successive passions for Orlov and Potemkin belonged to the past. In this period, two ladies of the Russian court acquired the nickname of "the tryers-out." It was accurate, too, for when the empress cast her eye upon another young officer of her guards, he would then be tried out first by "the tryers-out."

The comparison may seem ridiculous; indeed it is ridiculous. But during the earlier part of my stay here, I had a constant sense of being carefully pretested, both politically and intellectually.

The tests took the form of a series of conversations with officials in an ascending order of importance. They included a long luncheon with the leading men of The People's Daily and the even more important Chinese official news agency, Hainhua. They culminated in three fascinating hours of talk with the brilliant vice-minister of foreign affairs, Chiao Kuan-hua, who is known to be particularly close to Prime Minister Chou En-lai.

My sense of being tested was confirmed when the prime minister finally sent for my wife and me. Things I had said earlier somehow cropped up, even though I had not yet said them to Chou En-lai himself. Thus this trying-out process must be seen as having genuine meaning.

THE MEANING was reasonably bleak, too, for the central subject of the tryers-out was the triangular relationship between the United States, China and the Soviet Union. And the main sub-theme was the danger of a Soviet preventive attack on China.

One does not want to be too simplistic. The delay in the

Vietnamese cease-fire was certainly raised, although not so vigorously as when Chou En-lai received me. Again, the Helsinki talks about force reductions in Europe also recurred, with even greater regularity. But here it was ob-

vious that the Chinese were deeply concerned lest mutual force reductions in Europe should permit the Soviets to deploy even more divisions on China's frontier.

Being tested in this way had its curious aspects, too. In one of the early talks, the possible timing of a Soviet attack, if one should occur, had been a topic. I had therefore asked whether the Soviets would not have to make their decision, whether pro or con, before the Chinese nuclear program made too much progress. The answer had been affirmative.

IN A LATER TALK, I was then criticized—with direct reference to my question above noted—for "judging everything by weapons." I could only reply that the basic problem seemed to me to be political, in the sense that the Soviets still had to decide "what to do about China." But I again asked whether the growth of China's nuclear strength would not control the timing of this vital decision.

"I'm afraid you are probably right," was the answering comment.

There were other striking aspects of this series of talks, too. Although Nikita Khrushchev was the man who pulled out the Soviet experts and began the break with China, the government headed by Leonid Brezhnev was invariably described as "much worse."

The growing influence of the Soviet military caste on Soviet political decisions was treated as a known fact. The "unmasking and death of Lin Biao was also treated as most important to the Soviets, because it had "removed their only hope" of a differently oriented Chinese government.

In sum, this remarkable series of political talks, including that with the prime minister, made one thing perfectly clear to me. The people at home are idiotically deluding themselves, who comfortably suppose that Chinese policy is chiefly influenced by such currently unalarming factors as "fear of Japanese militarism." The unending Soviet military buildup on China's frontier is the true mainspring.