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Summitry (I)

Among all the superlatives that might be applied to Mr. Nixon's forthcoming "summit" meetings in Peking and Moscow (and more than a few already have been applied by the President) surely the safest is that no comparable diplomatic initiatives in history have been the subject of as much advance build-up and ballyhoo. For that reason among others, this might be a good time to look back over the record of summitry during the cold war years in search of some sounder perspective on what may lie ahead.

The process could be said to have begun in 1953:

Stalin had just died and Winston Churchill, urging that East-West conflicts be addressed in "a conference on the highest level," said: "If there is not at the summit of nations the will to win the greatest prize and greatest honor offered to mankind, doom-laden responsibility will fall upon those who now possess the power to decide. At the worst, the participants in the meeting could have established more intimate contacts, and at best we might have a generation of peace (sic)."

Departing for Geneva in 1955, President Eisenhower sounded precisely Churchill's note: "For the first time, a President goes to engage in a conference with the heads of other governments in order to prevent wars . . . if we change the spirit in which these conferences are conducted we will have taken the greatest step toward peace, toward future prosperity and tranquility that has ever been taken in the history of mankind." He returned to Washington more soberly, saying, "Just what will be the result of this conference, of course, no one knows but the coming months will tell much." Indeed they did. There followed the Hungarian Revolution and Suez invasion of 1956; Berlin exploded in 1958. Of Ike's Geneva topics—Germany, East Europe, "international communism," arms control, East-West contacts—only the last bore fruit in his presidency.

It was, then, a chastened Eisenhower who invited Nikita Khrushchev to visit this country in 1959 "to give him the opportunity to see . . . America" and to exchange political views in the hope that "serious exploratory efforts may reveal new opportunities for practical progress toward removal of some of the causes of world tensions." Following their discussions at Camp David, the two leaders reported only that they had agreed

to reopen talks on Berlin (which remained under Soviet ultimatum) and to increase cultural exchanges. At his next press conference a reporter asked if he and Khrushchev had melted some of the East-West ice and he replied: "the most that could be done here . . . is a beginning."

Nonetheless, the next May found him in Paris for a Big Four summit "of historic importance . . . The issues that divide the free world from the Soviet bloc are grave and not subject to easy solution. But if goodwill exists on both sides, at least a beginning can be made." This was not to be. The U-2 incident collapsed the summit before it opened, leaving Soviet-American relations worse off. "We did hope to make some progress," Mr. Eisenhower explained, but "we had no indication or thought that basic Soviet policies had turned about." "An extraordinary personality" to Ike the previous September, Khrushchev now became to him a "despot."

John Kennedy, about to meet Khrushchev in

Vienna in 1961, said carefully that his purpose was "to permit me to make a more precise judgment on those matters which involve the interests of the United States." Back home, he insisted that the meeting had not been "a full-fledged summit meeting with a fixed agenda and a large corps of advisers, where negotiations are attempted," but an "informal exchange." It had been "a very sober two days . . . at least the chances of a dangerous misjudgment on either side should now be less . . . We have wholly different views of right and wrong, of what is an internal affair and what is aggression . . . the question was whether these two systems can ever hope to live in peace . . ." There followed the Berlin Wall and a major Berlin crisis, the Soviet termination of the moratorium on atmospheric nuclear testing; deterioration in Vietnam (despite a treaty "neutralizing" Laos), and the Cuban missile crisis.

Lyndon Johnson's summit with Premier Kosygin

at Glassboro, N.J. in June, 1967, was announced only the night before, with no statement of his own by the President. "When nations have deeply different positions, as we do on these issues [ABM, Mideast, Vietnam]," he reported afterwards, "they do not come to agreement merely by improving their understanding of each other's views. But such improvement helps . . . We must all remember that there have been many meetings before . . ." Mr. Johnson was about to announce his own trip to Moscow, in order to open the SALT talks, when, in mid-1968 the Russians invaded Czechoslovakia. He stayed home. SALT was delayed a year.

The record of eight Soviet-American summits planned over a span of nearly 20 years, then, shows that: two produced good atmospherics for a short while (Spirit of Geneva 1955, Spirit of Camp David 1959); none produced agreements or significant progress towards agreements (except in cultural exchanges; at least two were followed by unusually bad patches in East-West affairs (1955, 1961); and two were aborted (1960, 1968). Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, who had the benefit of Mr. Eisenhower's experience, avoided his extravagant rhetoric but were not compensated by the Kremlin for their restraint. One is struck by the fact that of the few significant measurable improvements in East-West relations over two decades—such as the Austrian peace treaty, the partial test ban and the Berlin agreement—all have come from the ongoing process of diplomacy, none from the stir of a summit.

In our judgment, only one summit comes close to meriting judgment as a moderate success: Glassboro 1967. No great expectations were gotten up for it, sober and substantial communication seems to have gone on at the table, and its results apparently did not unhinge either side, although Lyndon Johnson was left with a further taste of summitry, which taste turned sour indeed. We are baffled if not dismayed that Mr. Nixon should feel otherwise. He said to CBS last Sunday: ". . . the Glassboro summit was a failure. When summits are not well planned, when they have for their purpose just cosmetics, they raise hopes and then there is a great thud when they fall down." This judgment, and the reading of history implicit in it, raise troublesome questions about the President's approach to summits of his own—questions which will be the subject of a second editorial.