

The Rabbit Punch

By William Safire

WASHINGTON—In a few days, Senator Henry Jackson is expected to announce officially that he is a candidate for President of the United States.

If he is to move at all, "Scoop" must make his move now, because he has recently been staggered by the most savage rabbit punch ever delivered a putative candidate for high office. The American Secretary of State, in an unprecedented political collaboration with the Soviet Ambassador to the United States, has placed the blame for the collapse of détente at the door of Senator Jackson.

Most Americans think what "Dobryssinger" wants them to think: that the insistence by the Senate that economic aid to the Soviet Union be tied to liberalized emigration policy led to the renunciation of the trade pact. Since "Scoop" Jackson led the charge for that linkage, and since he represents the most obvious threat to the Dobryssinger foreign affairs hegemony, he was the logical fall guy.

But the truth lies elsewhere. On Dec. 18, Leonid Brezhnev emerged shaken from a Politburo meeting to order the publication of an earlier, secret message from Mr. Gromyko to Mr. Kissinger warning that no "assurances" had been given on emigration, as Secretary Kissinger had been telling the Senate. This signalled the victory of Soviet hardliners in the Kremlin, and underscored the folly of conducting foreign affairs between superpowers on the basis of secret agreements arranged by modern Metternichs.

On the same day, Ambassador Dobrynin and Secretary Kissinger met to work out their mutual reaction. Their master plan had failed; as realists, they now had to devise a scheme to enable their reputations to survive, preferably one that would blame failure on a geopolitical opponent.

The instrument chosen—the pretense upon which the trade agreement would founder—was a Senate restriction on the amount of credit that could be extended to the Soviet Union by the Export-Import Bank. Wisely, the Senate bill introduced by Senator Adlai Stevenson III, Democrat of Illinois, made it necessary for the President to come back to Congress as credits to the U.S.S.R. reached \$300 million, which at the current pace was expected to be in about 18 months.

Last year, when the idea of putting a ceiling on Ex-Im credits was broached, Kissinger had mildly objected, but that was only because he did not want the Senate looking over his shoulder; the bankers and the Soviets knew that the ceiling, when reached, would be pushed up.

But on Dec. 19, the credit ceiling

that had already been passed suddenly became—to our own Department of State—an intolerable slap in the face to the Soviet Union. "Peanuts," said the Secretary of State (ours). He caused the official State Department spokesman to twist the facts: He divided the \$300-million ceiling by four years, the length of the term, to come up with a specious figure of \$75 million per year.

Officials at the Export-Import Bank were incredulous; so were other Administration economists, who knew that the computation was false and that a credit line was intended to be raised as utilized. Could the State Department be making a stupid mistake?

Hardly. At year end, Secretary Kissinger told the coterie which agrees not to attribute direct quotations to

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him: "The bill permits credits to them at the rate of \$75 million a year, which toward a superpower is an insult . . . an absurdity."

Why, a logical mind might wonder, would the United States Secretary of State insist on the world knowing that the Soviets had been deliberately insulted? Why would he interpret an action that was not considered an insult in such a way that a gullible press corps and a sensitive superpower would have to take it as a humiliation? The reason why, of course, was that a scapegoat was needed and the United States Senate was the scapegoat.

Sure enough, a couple of weeks after being informed by the Secretary of State (ours) that it had been publicly humiliated, the Soviet Union renounced the trade agreement, and the Dobryssinger propaganda apparatus put out the line that the Senate—Jackson and the rest—had torpedoed détente, despite the efforts of the peace-loving forces in Washington and the Kremlin.

Actually, on Dec. 18 the decision was made by the Dobryssinger factor to accept defeat and lay the blame elsewhere.

"Henry plays a hard game," said Richard Nixon admiringly one day after his National Security Adviser had emasculated a bureaucratic rival. Leaders topple; policies crash in flames; Henry survives.

As Senator Jackson officially enters the lists, trying to clear his head from that Dobryssinger rabbit punch, he faces the opposition of the left wing of the Democratic party and the right wing of the Soviet Politburo.

Waiting for him, further down the road, is the man who has shown himself daring enough to use foreign affairs leverage in domestic politics—the only Secretary of State under whom two Presidents have served.