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Letter to Sen. Kennedy: Soviets Change the Rules



WASHINGTON — In over three decades in the business, this reporter has tried to put reporting ahead of opinion. Open letters are always written to air opinions, and no open letter has ever appeared in this space. But the time comes to break most rules, and this is therefore an open letter to Sen. Edward Kennedy: Dear Senator, I address you because the events of the last weekend seemed to indicate the widespread prevalence of sheer political lunacy in this poor country of ours, and because I suspect that you, almost alone, have it in your power to bring many people back to their senses.

Washington was invaded by tens of thousands of people, mostly very young, decent and idealistic, and most quite untouched by the normal harshnesses of the historic process and utterly unaware of history's harshness. They were here to protest against what promises to be a major American success in Southeast Asia, which may also greatly shorten the Vietnamese War.

Passionately demonstrating against your own country's successes on the battlefield is something rather new in this country. It put me in mind of nothing so much as the downright feverish reactions of the Federalists to their first, and final, loss of power.

The Federalists, our young republic's "Party of Wealth and Talents," were a narrow minority with the habit of getting its own way.

In the same fashion, the young people who came here mainly represent a quite different but again highly privileged American minority that has long been used to getting its own way.

Like the Federalist minority, this modern group has much leverage, especially in the universities and the media. Ever since the leverage began to fail on occasion, the responses have come closer and closer to those of Federalists (who talked of secession).

Almost all the leverage will surely be lost in the end, as also happened to the Federalists, unless leaders like yourself point a new direction.

Total Complacency Elsewhere

Yet the lunacy that is so worrying does not reside in the protest against American success. It resides, rather, in the contrast between the passion of this protest and the total complacency about recent events elsewhere, that may well be remembered—and perhaps with guilty horror—long after the clearance of the Cambodian sanctuary-bases has been utterly forgotten.

I am sure you cannot contemplate with calm the possibility that Israel's two and a half million brave people will be added to

this century's dreadful toll of Jewish victims. Yet that possibility is what we now have to worry about (if our worries have rational priorities) because of the sudden appearance of Russian troops and flyers in Egypt in a combat role.

The technical-military reasons for the danger to Israel are exceedingly complex. But all these reasons can be boiled down to two simple formulas. Israel can hold off, and has held off, any number of Arabs supplied with any quantity of Russian arms. But in the long run, Israel cannot possibly hold off the Arabs—plus limitless Russian arms—plus Russians fighting at the side of the Arabs. That is the essence of the matter for Israel.

Unprecedented Soviet Move

For us, the unprecedented Soviet move in Egypt also has a larger significance. In



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the whole quarter-century of the Cold War, we have had to expect almost anything from the Kremlin except Russian troops committed to a war outside the borders of the Soviet empire.

That long-standing rule has now been broken in Egypt, and this is a most dangerous, probably permanent

mutation in Kremlin behavior.

The wiser Soviet experts, who were much surprised by the mutation, are now explaining it on two grounds. First, they say that episodes like last weekend's demonstration have much emboldened the masters of the Kremlin, as the so-called "Oxford Oath" not to fight for king or country is well known to have emboldened Adolf Hitler.

Second, the experts believe the Soviets have now recalculated the risks they regard as acceptable to gain their ends because this country has altogether lost the five-to-one nuclear superiority we enjoyed in your brother's time in the White House. If this is true, then your position on the ABM needs careful re-examination.

But much more needs re-examination than the ABM matter. The change in the rules of Soviet behavior, the grave resulting threat to Israel, the strong possibility that the Soviets may be hoping to gain control of the whole Middle East by helping to destroy Israel—such grim new factors in the world scene in fact demand a recall to painful fact-facing, a recall to national effort.

Your brother the President did not hold the strange new view that our country is immune from history's dangers. So I hope you do not share it either.

Sincerely, your friend.