

The Ides of March: Nixon Aides Discover Good Omens

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WASHINGTON, March 15 —The Ides of March, 1971, mercifully failed to produce anything as dramatic as the stabbing of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. or the abdication of Czar Nicholas in A.D. 1917. But they were not without portent, starting with President Nixon's declaration, during an extraordinary two-hour Washington television interview, that he was not at all concerned about his image or modest standing in the opinion polls.

Whatever the President's private reason for abandoning two years of reticence and submitting to a squall of interviews, most of his aides are celebrating his sudden "opening up" for talk about his parents' Puritan ethics (The London Sunday Telegraph), about his philosophy of peace through global strength (The New York Times), about the unknown strengths of Mrs. Nixon (a group of women reporters), about the restiveness of youth, the importance of women and the strain of living with a tenacious husband like himself (N.B.C.).

In fact, the image makers around the White House have long deemed it politically essential for the President to exhibit more the informal man they admire. And despite the denials, they think that the ambiguous election results last November and Mr. Nixon's shaky showing in the polls persuaded him to try new forms of publicity. If the public responds, they expect a considerable change of style in the months ahead.

The Ides of this March also brought the resumption of arms control talks with the Russians in Vienna. After 16 months of exploration, the Administration is not now hopeful of reaching even a limited agreement soon, and it doubts that the negotiators can restrain the major competition of the moment for better, rather than merely more, nuclear weapons.

The genie of the multi-headed missile, known as MIRV in strategic jargon, seems to have escaped from the bottle since the United States first proposed arms limitation talks four years ago. Judging by the public record, the Pentagon is pleased that MIRV's will not appear on the bargaining table and is moving on to address itself to still more sophisticated generations of missiles.

Whereas the President's

State of the World Message carefully retained the standard argument that multihead missiles were needed to penetrate a strong Soviet defensive system, the Defense Department's new posture statement reduces that rationale to second place.

Implicitly discounting the possibility of an agreement to limit or even eliminate defense systems—the only possibility thus far raised by the talks — the statement contends that MIRV's are essential to give the United States enough warheads for retaliation in the event it is forced to absorb a severe Soviet first strike.

Keeping up with the portents here requires not only catching the President on Television at breakfast time but also monitoring the rebroadcast of a fascinating seminar before the Federal Communications Commission until long after midnight.

While the politicians in Congress are making headlines on the issues of snooping and bugging, the Commissioners are quietly groping for a national policy on plugging—the coming cable connection of virtually every home to hundreds of multipurpose channels for the transmission of pictures and sounds and at least a limited response by the viewer.

The commission's problem is how to encourage the technology and commercial investment in the system, known as CATV, while making certain, in the early stages, that the widest possible segment of the public will have access both to the management of the system and the material it purveys.

Broadcasters, foundation heads, cable franchise holders, motion picture producers, representatives of blacks and church groups and many others are being heard in the final debate.

The overwhelming plea of disinterested witnesses is that the commission retain tight control over a medium that is likely to dominate communications in a short time, carrying public, commercial and personal news, information and entertainment.

A common theme in the often rambling discourse is that the country has not done well in past planning for vital communication and transportation systems, and that the F.C.C. now holds enormous power for good or ill.

There were some troubling omens, too, behind the hear-

ings on William J. Casey's nomination for the chairmanship of the Securities and Exchange Commission.

The staff of Senator William Proxmire asked two former chairmen, three noted law professors in the securities field and three former commission lawyers now in private practice to testify that Mr. Casey's business activities and regulation standards should disqualify him.

Of the eight, two said that they did not find the case strong enough to warrant their public opposition; the others expressed fears for the fate of the agency but said that they did not dare to speak up because their clients must appear before the commission.

"If you strike at a king, you must kill him," said one of the reluctant lawyers. Though highly controversial in the industry, the appointment comes to a Senate vote this week with the recorded testimony of only Mr. Casey and two associates who spoke as character witnesses.

On the other side of Capitol Hill, the portents this day were that President Nixon's public scolding had not even dented the sovereignty of Representative Wilbur Mills.

The chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, having pushed through the new Social Security bill and infuriated the White House by negotiating with the Japanese for an alternative to textile quotas, turns now to a major revision of the welfare system, through which he may also scuttle much of the President's revenue-sharing plan.

He is also preparing a health insurance package that may take legislative shape before Mr. Nixon's does.

Washington has taken to kidding about whether Mr. Mills would ever consider stepping down from his job to run for the presidency, to which the President might reply that if he, the President, really wished to promote his program, he should have stayed in the House.