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Hair on the Potomac

By RUSSELL BAKER

WASHINGTON, Sept. 22—Toughness. Yes, toughness. That is what we admire here. Here in Washington. The nation's capital, baby, and don't you forget it.

Note the iron-fisted quality of that opening paragraph, for example. Its trip-hammer power. Its bluntness. Its utter lack of grace. Five periods in a mere 21 words. It is a paragraph with hair on its chest. Hair all over its face. A tough Washington paragraph.

In Washington, of course, we don't talk in paragraphs as tough as that.

No sir.

When we talk in Washington, we like to let on that we're a bunch of pussyfooters. "Oh, yes, good citizens," we say, "we shall implement that for you just as soon as the input process of the game plan has received maximized minimumization at the sub-Cabinet interagency cosmopolitan review level, with the proviso that coordination has been fully internalized in consonance with the effluvium plug."

You see the point. Pussyfoot talk shows that we are cool, contained, and don't know what we are talking about.

But underneath all the syllables, we are thinking in tough paragraphs.

Tough.

Paragraphs.

The kind of tough paragraphs that only the truly tough-minded can think in for longer than three rounds without collapsing in mental exhaustion. Because we are nothing here if not tough-minded.

Tough.

Minded.

Some people will tell you we are too tough-minded here in Washington. They don't like the way our tough minds shoot first and ask questions later. These people are flabby-minded.

They say our tough minds should leave the gun in the holster and sit around quietly coddling this and that, and then maybe shoot later but only if the coddling doesn't pacify the object of our gunfire.

Thank fifty years of cowboy movies, we aren't going to listen to that kind

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of talk. Not us. We say the time to ask questions is when there's nobody left to disagree with our answers.

The only reason we can say that is because of our toughness. It isn't easy to tell some big creep you're going to blow up the whole world unless he's out of Cuba by sundown, but it's a lot of fun if you like playing games in which everybody can get killed. Provided you're tough. And have a hard nose.

Flabby-minded people are permissible, of course, because it takes minds in all sorts of physical condition, including run-down and easily winded, to make up a country. Nobody in his right tough mind, however, wants flabby-minded people in Washington.

Flabby-minded people are sissies.

They are soft-nosed.

They are coddlers.

They come back without the coonskin.

They would let the country become a pitiful helpless giant.

They would let a rat get away with the bacon rather than stand on principle and blow up the smokehouse, burn down the farm and defoliate the corn crop.

And after that happened, pretty soon rats everywhere would be saying, "America is no longer number one. America has become number two."

America is playing in a tough league. A league getting tougher every year. Keeping America number one requires men tough enough to mouse-trap the yen, fake the Chinats out of the U.N., bribe the scorekeeper in Saigon, throw the bomb against the North Vietnamese and jail or shoot anybody in the stadium who boos the game plan.

Sounds mean, doesn't it? That's because it is mean. It's got to be mean. Because toughness is what it takes here in Washington. Where the name of the game is *machismo*.

That's *machismo*, baby. Never forget it.

And wipe that smile off your face. Pronto!