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# Rejecting Option Three

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, Aug. 18—No country has been more affected than Japan by President Nixon's twin stunners—his proposed visit to Peking and his new economic policy. So Japanese officials here are ruefully quipping that what happens twice may happen three times.

It might at that. It's never wise to predict too much about a President on the basis of past performance, as if he were a race horse or a quarter-back. Yet a pattern is to be found in these two major decisions—each of truly historic dimensions—that is too interesting to be overlooked.

In the first place, each decision represented a total reversal of a deeply held attitude. As candidate and President, of course, Mr. Nixon dropped certain routine suggestions that he wished to improve Chinese-American relations, and it is now clear that he and Dr. Kissinger

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worked assiduously to help bring about the beginning thaw. Nevertheless, Mr. Nixon virtually built his career on anti-Communism that career really got its start in the hysterical American political atmosphere following the "loss" of China, and few politicians of the mid-war era were more steadfastly opposed to dealing with the Chinese Communists than Richard Nixon.

Similarly, the President has been long and bitterly opposed to wage-price controls in any form—an opposition that biographers and friends trace to disillusioning personal experience as a low-level Government attorney in the World War II price control program. As have most other American political leaders, moreover, Mr. Nixon has spoken in the past as if the fixed gold value of the dollar was as hallowed as motherhood and the flag; for merely suggesting that a change might someday have to be considered, former Treasury Secretary Kennedy felt out of favor early in the Administration.

The second element of the pattern is that when Mr. Nixon chose, or was forced, to change his mind, in each case he did not edge, slip or back into some slight mutation of his old policy. Nor did he, in current White House jargon, choose "option three"—a com-

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promise course that splits the middle of contending positions.

Instead, he came all the way around. He is not merely studying the Chinese situation or moving in the U.N. or sending off a goodwill mission; he is going to Peking himself. He is not appointing a wage-price "review board" or merely "consulting" on the dollar; he froze wages and prices and, in effect, devalued.

Third, Mr. Nixon made no effort in either case to conceal or soften what must be two of the most complete reversals of policy in Presidential history, nor for him the brazen evasion of a Lyndon Johnson bombing North Vietnam and claiming no change from President Eisenhower's policy. Mr. Nixon immediately leaped before television cameras and told all, even a little boastfully—his trip to Peking was to be a "journey for peace" and the economic policy was the most comprehensive in four decades.

Finally, those of us who have been most critical of Mr. Nixon—even those "conservative" lions who deserted him on the China issue—ought to admit that both of these decisions took courage. In particular, if his timing leaves the President with a messy wage-and-price-fixing situation on his hands far into next year, the net political result could be badly damaging to his re-election prospects.

Interestingly enough, this pattern stretches to cover at least one other big Nixon decision—the invasion of Cambodia. That was not quite of the same magnitude as the later two and was more a reversal of established policy than of a deep-seated personal conviction. There was, nevertheless, no "option three" but a complete turnabout from tolerating the Cambodian sanctuaries to an across-the-board attack on all of them. The decision was promptly celebrated on television, and it also took a certain courage (foolhardy courage, some of us would say).

None of this necessarily means anything for the future, but the pattern does suggest that in the largest policy questions Mr. Nixon will not necessarily be limited by his past views, and that he is capable of the most sweeping change. It suggests also that he is a big-stakes gambler, and one well aware of his Presidential powers to impress the American people with large undertakings.

What may be most interesting about this pattern is that the corrosive and degenerating situation in Vietnam may yet demand of Richard Nixon—for better or for worse, by the Cambodian or the Chinese precedent—the kind of big, tough, risky turnabout decision he has shown the world he is willing to make.