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Mr. Ford's Secret Timetable

IS GERALD FORD planning to repudiate America's treaty with the Republic of China (Taiwan), as the price of diplomatic relations with Peking, just as soon as the election is over and he is safely sworn in again? There is fresh evidence that this is exactly what the Ford administration's secret timetable calls for.



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Ordinarily questions of foreign policy play a relatively small part in our quadrennial presidential elections. Traditionally the permanent staff of the State Department, which regards the elections as a bore and a nuisance anyway, keeps a low profile until after the voters have spoken. Then they come out from under their rocks and proceed to do as they please, regardless of the outcome of the voting.

It was, therefore, quite a departure from precedent when the issue of the Panama Canal broke loose and began rolling around in full public view right in the midst of Ford's primary campaign against Reagan.

For several years, despite strenuous opposition on Capitol Hill, the shadowy figures in the lower echelons at State have been edging this country towards surrendering to Panama many of the rights to the Canal Zone that we acquired "in perpetuity" by treaty in 1903. The fix was supposedly in for early 1977, and General Omar Torrijos, the Panamanian dictator, was content to bide his time until then, knowing that American voters could upset the applecart if they got wind of the deal in time. Thanks to Ronald Reagan, they did — and now the Canal issue is a very hot potato indeed.

SIMILARLY, State Department staffers have been telling our Nationalist Chinese allies privately for several months that, once the election is over, their jig is up: U.S. diplomatic recognition of Red China is in the cards for the early months of the new administration, even though Peking insists that we must first break our military assistance treaty with Taipei.

To be sure, most of these breezy assertions were made before Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter begin to show such winning form in the primaries.

The insiders at State know very well that Reagan, if elected president, would never countenance the breaking of America's solemn pledge to the anti-Communist Chinese government on Taiwan. And they can hardly be very sure where Jimmy Carter, whose views are seldom typically Washingtonian, stands on the question.

Repeated opinion polls show that most Americans wouldn't object to relations with Peking as such, but do object to achieving them at the price of repudiating our treaty obligations to Taipei.

STILL, ON the assumption that the Democrats would name some typical liberal, the prediction was safe enough if that party were to win.

And evidence has recently come to light indicating that Gerald Ford, too, is committed to the early recognition to Red China on the same terms.

Within 48 hours after Peking confirmed Hua Kuo-feng's designation as premier of the Communist regime on the mainland, President Ford dispatched a letter to Hua, congratulating him and "reaffirming" this country's determination "to complete the normalization of our relations on the basis of the Shanghai communique." This was a reference to the communique, issued in Shanghai in the close of President Nixon's 1972 visit to Red China which declared the intention of the conferees to work to "further" the normalization of relations.

OUR TREATY with Taipei is, however, a serious roadblock on the way to full recognition of Peking, and until Ford became president this country had therefore always pledged to "further" rather than "complete" the process of normalization. By vowing to "complete" it, Ford has in effect assured Hua that full recognition is on the way.

Understandably, in the light of its potentially explosive impact on the campaign, Ford kept this letter from the American public. But Radio Peking, naturally delighted at the news, promptly broadcast it.

So Americans are on notice now that their president, who presided helplessly over the collapse of our South Vietnamese allies, is getting ready to pull the rug from yet another U.S. treaty. In the process, he may be fashioning yet another hot issue for Ronald Reagan.