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Mr. Nixon's State of the World

The report to the Congress on President Nixon's foreign policy is described by Henry Kissinger, its chief author, as "a framework for a debate on foreign policy in this country." And, he adds, "we would welcome a debate." The challenge is unlikely to be ignored. But it confronts the Democrats with serious difficulties. In what is essentially a campaign document for the 1972 Presidential election, Mr. Nixon can be seen between the lines relishing the extent to which he has stolen the opposition's shirt.

Seldom in Western politics since Disraeli's Reform Bill of 1867—when Lord Derby boasted, "We've dished the Whigs"—has a national leader so completely turned his back on a lifetime of beliefs to adopt those of his political opponents. Mr. Nixon's objective is clear. The Democrats, he said a few weeks ago, can try to make an issue of the economy or the problems of the cities or of youth, "but we have the peace issue—that is our greatest strength."

As proof that President Nixon can bring the nation "a generation of peace," the so-called State of the World message catalogues with recognizable campaign hyperbole a three-year record of initiatives, progress and "breakthroughs" in foreign policy. Switches in policy are described as needed to meet changes in the world, as they surely were.

Two pictures to come—Mr. Nixon with Mao and with Brezhnev—will say more to many voters than the 100,000 words in yesterday's report. They will signal that the cold war has given way to a truce and parleys. But analysis of Mr. Nixon's report shows that the world is more complicated and his policies less clear than this would indicate.

Whatever happens in Peking, President Nixon's reversal of two decades of American policy toward China is a historic event. A dialogue has replaced belligerency on both sides.

The Moscow visit is less simple. A first-stage agreement limiting strategic arms clearly is in the bag, as is substantial progress on trade, which Mr. Nixon regards as a carrot to move Moscow from confrontation toward accommodation. The ceiling on defensive antiballistic missiles (ABM's) and offensive land-based ICBM's that will be set, while far higher than needed, is not to be scorned.

But MIRV multiple warheads have been perpetrated on mankind, 800 hydrogen warheads have been added to the arsenals of each side since 1969 and a new race in submarine-based missiles may be under way. A comprehensive agreement remains distant. Reductions in nuclear missile overkill may be even further off. If Mr. Nixon had not wasted a year in getting the strategic arms limitation talks (SALT) with Russia under way, if he had adopted the more forthcoming proposals of the Senate and his own prestigious advisory committee, much more might have been achieved.

In other areas, Mr. Nixon's record is more vulnerable. He cannot be blamed for the failure to achieve peace in the Middle East, but his blind support of Pakistan and the increase in Soviet influence that has come out of the war with India cannot be explained away, as yesterday's report seeks to do. Nor is the report convincing in claiming substantial credit for the Berlin agreement or, most curiously, an improvement in "partnership" relations with America's allies in Europe and Japan.

The tone of national rivalry, in place of international cooperation, that Mr. Nixon injected last August into economic relations with America's chief allies continues in the State of the World report. The unilateral measures that precipitated a world monetary and trade crisis have left scars that will not easily be erased.

But, in terms of the 1972 election, the disclosures of recent days make it evident that Vietnam may still prove the key foreign policy issue. Mr. Nixon, on present planning, will have removed a half-million American troops from Vietnam before November, leaving only 25,000 to 35,000 still there. But, unless private negotiations can resume—and succeed in achieving a political settlement—the war will still be on. Mr. Nixon promised in 1968 to end it. In the Kissinger-Le Duc Tho talks last summer, he made a serious try. But, in politics, rewards are less likely for effort than for success, something that still eludes him.

Unquestionably, there is room for a national debate not only on Vietnam but on the Nixon foreign policy as a whole. That policy has been a mixture of imaginative initiatives and classical balance-of-power politics, its purposes often confused and its results mixed. The irony is that it has succeeded most where Mr. Nixon has stolen the policies of his liberal opponents, a flexible approach that now is his greatest strength in the Presidential campaign.