

The Politics Of

Patriotism

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BOSTON, Feb. 15—When someone who has suffered an apparent embarrassment chooses to dramatize it, we begin to wonder. Why protest so much? Was it really a defeat? Or might the episode be useful to the seeming loser for some unseen purpose?

The recent performance of President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger arouses puzzlement of that kind. They have chosen to dramatize a series of seeming embarrassments, crying of damage to the country and themselves. One begins to wonder why.

Consider the curious case of Angola. Here was a place where the Soviets had a long history of involvement with the African nationalists, we very little, and where we now admit it made no difference to us which nationalist faction won the internal struggle. An unlikely place for America to intervene—but the Ford Administration did. And it did so by covert means that were certain to become known, and to cause an uproar in Congress and the country.

The Angolan adventure is just as odd in foreign as in domestic terms. Its aim was supposedly to fight Soviet influence. But leading figures in the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, the Soviet-supported fac-

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tion, wanted good relations with the United States; our opposition made them more dependent on the Russians. Now, as the Popular Movement wins, the Ford Administration prepares to get along with it pragmatically—but still scores American critics for abandoning "the people of Angola."

The performance is so peculiar that some observers have written it off as irrational. After all the disclosures of covert abuses, they ask, what sane American government would run a large-scale operation that was bound to leak, bound to arouse strong criticism and almost bound to fail?

But there could be method in the madness. What the world sees as self-inflicted wounds may look to the authors like a way of electing Gerald Ford and keeping Henry Kissinger in office.

Cynical? Oh yes. But hardly impossible. There are many signs that Mr. Ford wants to run as the patriotic candidate—against a Democratic Congress that he can imply is soft on Communism, loose with secrets and ready to retreat from American greatness. That line is especially useful for competing with Ronald Reagan, who scorns Mr. Ford and Mr. Kissinger as soft.

"Who lost Angola?" There is a good campaign cry. Mr. Ford came close to it when he denounced Congress last week for barring covert intervention in Angola. "They've lost their guts," he said. And: "I think they'll live to regret [it]." The phrasing had the delicacy of Joe McCarthy's.

It would of course be too simple to suggest that domestic politics was the original motive of the Angolan policy. After the demonstration of his impotence in Vietnam, Mr. Kissinger was eager to show toughness somewhere. (A revealing sentence in his recent Senate testimony on Angola said the United States must not be "seen to emasculate itself.")

But he had to know that the arms and money flowing to Angola would not remain secret for long. Perhaps he and the President were actually foolish enough to expect support from Congress when the story got out. Perhaps such a miscalculation helps to explain their hysterical overreaction, their exaggeration of Angola's world significance.

In any event, Mr. Ford and Mr. Kissinger are obviously making the most of the defeat now, in political terms. And their hard line on Angola, blaming Congress and the Democrats for a loss to Communism, is echoed on the whole question of covert operations and secrecy.

The Administration has mounted a counteroffensive on the issue of intelligence abuses, skillfully using the murder of Richard Welch and leaks of the House intelligence report as bad examples. They have suggested that for anyone outside the executive branch to know about covert operations is dangerous. The aim is to block proposals for serious Congressional oversight of the intelligence community—oversight that would prevent such abuses as the Angola intervention.

Some people troubled about intelligence abuses have turned pessimistic about the chances of reform, but not everyone in Congress feels that way. One important factor is that the C.I.A. itself would prefer a new oversight system to the present law, which requires reports to six different committees about covert operations.

"The current situation is intolerable to everyone," one Congressional expert said. "That's why I still think we are going to get reform—not because we are good guys."

On the other hand, Mr. Ford and Mr. Kissinger might prefer to fight Congress, painting themselves as patriots, even at the cost of preventing any change in the present law. That, at least, is one possible interpretation of their provocative tactics on Angola and other recent matters. What is needed, and painfully absent now, is a strong voice in Congress to contest their definition of patriotism.