

... and the Impact of Watergate

The first potentially disastrous result abroad of President Nixon's Watergate catastrophe is now being felt with stinging impact in the collapse of his Cambodian policy and, more important, in the sudden awareness by Peking that the American connection is shot through with dangerous unpredictables.

The reaction in Peking to Mr. Nixon's worst time of troubles is still to a large extent ambiguous, shrouded in the minds of China's cold-eyed policymakers. These men regard the new American connection as having only one justification: As a counterweight to the power and hostility of the Soviet Union.

But not all the signs are completely ambiguous. Thus, the delay in Sen. Mike Mansfield's much-heralded second trip to Peking was specifically due to a polite but no-nonsense warning from Communist authorities there that this was not a propitious time.

The reason for that, it now appears certain, is that the special usefulness of Mansfield, as perceived in Peking, was his own special relationship with Prince Sihanouk, the ousted Cambodian monarch and Mansfield's old friend.

At the time Mansfield, the Senate majority leader, was originally asked to make his second visit to Peking, Communist China was looking to the Sihanouk option as the most promising of all the limited possibilities for settling the Cambodian civil war on terms not totally unacceptable to Peking.

The restoration of the mystic, playboy prince, the most popular figure in

a country that until recently used to laugh at politics, was designed to give Peking an enduring political influence in Phnom Penh. With Sihanouk restored, and backed by both Peking and Washington, the threatening growth of power throughout the Indochina peninsula by North Vietnam would be at least temporarily stopped.

Moreover, precisely some such political deal with Sihanouk was what Mr. Nixon has been plotting for months. Indeed, there is solid reason to believe that if Congress, in its unprecedented action of June 30, had not forced a bombing-ban on the President, the U.S. and China could have contrived just such an end to the Cambodian sector of the Indochina war by mid-September.

It was to prepare the way for such a settlement that Mansfield was needed in Peking. Likewise it was to bargain for just such a settlement that Mr. Nixon had ordered his ace foreign policy expert, Dr. Henry A. Kissinger, to go to Peking early this month. That journey, along with Mansfield's, will now not take place this month.

Imagine, then, how the cold-eyed rulers of Communist China must be reacting to the sudden discovery that President Nixon's freedom of action to negotiate has been undermined—in this case, by the bombing ban. Continuation of the bombing was judged no less in Peking than in Washington as an essential part of the complicated formula to slow the pro-Hanoi, "Khmer

William Raspberry is on vacation. His column will resume upon his return.

Rouge" Communist revolutionary movement in Cambodia, paving the way for Prince Sihanouk.

Suddenly, Peking's clandestine ally in this complex political maneuver, Richard M. Nixon, is crippled not by foreign influence but by his own Congress reacting to growing presidential weakness induced by Watergate.

In Peking, the political ravages of Watergate are probably perceived with the same disbelief that guided U.S. policymakers during the ravages of the Great Proletarian Revolution in China in the late 1960s.

"Would Washington have made its political connection with Peking at the height of the cultural revolution?" one top Nixon lieutenant asks rhetorically, "when no one could even predict that the rulers of China would remain rulers for even another month?"

Or, as another White House aide put it sarcastically, Peking must wonder how the party that was repudiated in a historical landslide last November now finds its policies accepted in Congress, while the big winner, President Nixon, becomes the big loser.

Nothing has happened yet to destroy the short-term durability of the Washington-Peking axis. Its foundation—Peking's fear of Moscow—has not changed an iota.

But hideous dangers lie behind the ambiguities of subtle change in the way Peking—and all other nations—must now be studying the trust and durability of the U.S. as an ally. These are dangers blithely ignored by the faithless who gave the nation Watergate.