

By William Safire

## ESSAY

WASHINGTON—The President lay on a massage table, a doctor ministering to his aching back, when Henry Kissinger came in to give him the bad news during the Moscow summit conference of 1972.

Soviet negotiators would not budge on two areas in which a strategic arms limitation agreement would leave the United States at a disadvantage. President Nixon told his national security adviser to keep negotiating, but to let the other side know that the President was ready to return to the United States without a SALT treaty.

Dr. Kissinger did so; the Soviets caved, and the first SALT agreement was signed. All of us there marveled at the President's cold-blooded poker-playing.

Long afterward, I wondered: What "political risk" had Mr. Nixon taken? The first SALT agreement received polite applause from the left and center, some criticism from the right. But if the summit had ended with his refusal to sign a lopsided agreement, the political left at home could not have faulted him, and the hardline right would have hailed him as a hero.

In political terms, Mr. Nixon in Moscow was in a no-lose situation: Because the Soviets knew he was quite prepared to go back without an agreement, they proceeded to settle on fair terms.

This episode comes to mind as President Nixon prepares to visit Moscow again this summer. Many Americans are worried about a President afflicted with Watergate weakness dealing with the Russians: Won't he be inclined to make any deal he can get just to prop up his popularity?

The worry is dramatized by the imminence of impeachment, and deepened by indications of the failure of Secretary of State Kissinger's prelimi-

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nary trip to Moscow. The Soviet press has been attacking the stories based on Kissinger background briefings as destructive of détente, making it appear that the SALT negotiations are falling apart.

To understand what is going on, let us think like superpower politicians.

First, the Soviets "give" only as much as they must, and as late as possible; that time has not yet come.

Second, battered American Presidents do not send high-flying Secretaries of State to Moscow to glory in "conceptual breakthroughs," which might make a crucial Presidential trip closing the deal seem to be an unnecessary clinking of champagne glasses. Mr. Nixon hoped Secretary Kissinger would have done better, but not much better; and both men know how to finesse an adversary's rigidity with unattributed predictions of disaster.

Third, the plain political fact is that the President would have more to gain at home by not returning with a SALT agreement than by coming back with one.

Try this airport speech for size: "My

fellow Americans, nobody has traveled farther for peace than I have. But this time, because some wallowers in Watergate put their vindictiveness ahead of the cause of peace, the Soviet leaders thought they could take advantage.

"I could have acceded to their demands and brought back a meaningless scrap of paper. But that would have led to weakness, war or surrender. And so I told Mr. Brezhnev that I would never sell out American security, not if it cost me my job . . ."

Hoot if you will, but such a speech would make a strong appeal to the people Mr. Nixon counts upon to "hang tough" against his ouster.

Richard Nixon began in the late forties by lambasting the Communists; I recall taking a picture of him in a Moscow kitchen in 1959 that we hailed as evidence of how he could "stand up to the Russians"; there would be some poetic justice if he survived as President by "standing up to the Russians" one more time.

The fourth fact of power politics: The Soviets know all about the President's present weakness, his need for hardliner support, and his old-time talents in cultivating that garden. Anatoly Dobrynin understands the pressures of American politics better than most American politicians.

Therefore, paradoxically, the political vulnerability of the President becomes a negotiating strength: If the Soviets want to make any kind of SALT deal, they will have to take into account the Nixon need to cater to his own right wing.

All of which is why Mr. Nixon will be going to Moscow this summer, come hell or high crimes. If he fails to reach an arms control agreement, he will survive as President with no loss to the nation of its strategic position; if he succeeds, he will be blessed by the grandchildren of his fiercest critics as the greatest peacemaker of his time.