

The Mood Of Washington

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Feb. 26—Some of the Presidential candidates (notably Ronald Reagan, George Wallace and Jimmy Carter) are running against "Washington" these days; and others, like Scoop Jackson, are running against Henry Kissinger and the present foreign policy of the United States; but Washington and its foreign policy remain on a fairly steady course.

The candidates have the headlines, but the Government has the power. The parties are fussing with one another, but on the policies that affect the lives of the people and the security of the nation, the Republican Administration and the Democratic Congress, with occasional partisan lapses, are sticking to the nation's business.

On the fundamental questions of U.S. relations with the Soviet Union, China, Japan, Europe and the Middle East, and on world trade and monetary policy, President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger are probably closer to Mike Mansfield, Speaker Carl Albert and Hubert Humphrey, the Democratic leaders, than the latter are to the Presidential candidates of their own party.

Messrs. Mansfield and Albert are loyal Democrats, but you can search the record without finding a single fundamental foreign policy issue where they put partisan politics ahead of the national interest. This town is jumping with political gossip, and it is watching the personal struggle in the primary elections with more attention than any other city in the nation. With the help of the "hated bureaucracy," however, it is doing its job.

Nobody knows this better than the leaders of the other major nations of the world. If Leonid Brezhnev, presiding over the 25th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in Moscow, really thought the United States was

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as divided and its Administration as weak and misguided as Messrs. Reagan, Wallace and Carter suggest, presumably he would be taking a very hard cold-war line against the United States, but instead he defended the policy of co-existence.

He insisted on Moscow's determination to support Communist ideology and assist "national liberation movements," as in Angola, but defended the policy of peace, arms control and trade with the United States.

"We make no secret," he said, "of the fact that we see détente as the way to create more favorable conditions for peaceful socialist and Communist construction." In other words, what is best for his own country and system. But he supported the Ford-Mansfield-Humphrey policy of compromise, and left it to the American people to decide in the election whether they want to side with the candidates who want to substitute a Reagan or Jackson policy of confrontation.

It is odd that, arguing for détente, Mr. Brezhnev has played or allowed Fidel Castro to play the Cuban military card in Africa. If this goes on, all parties and candidates in the United States will oppose and eventually take action against Castro, but for the time being, public opinion in the United States seems still to be on the side of patience and moderation.

China has been more reckless in trying to intervene in the U.S. election. It has tried to use Richard Nixon against his own President to dramatize China's anti-Soviet policy. Ironically, Mr. Nixon, the old anti-Communist, has allowed himself to be used in a Communist maneuver, but too much has been made of this obvious and silly incident.

It was merely a mistake of manners and timing, but not important. It created a momentary flurry in the New Hampshire primary, but probably changed no more than a few hundred votes. The surprising thing is that the Peking Government and, for a few days, the Ford Administration took it seriously, when its only real significance is that it has deprived Mr. Nixon of his argument that he is too ill to testify in all the Watergate trials now wanting him as a witness.

Washington is agitated and irritated by all these campaign maneuvers. It resents the argument that it is the problem. It has made fundamental blunders, and acknowledges them, but in the last two generations, it has rescued the nation from social and economic disruption, and established a new, if shaky, balance of power.

So it asks what Messrs. Reagan, Wallace, and Carter would put in the place of the policy of coexistence in the world, and Social Security, welfare and unemployment insurance at home. Lacking any rational answer from the candidates so far, the Administration, the Congress and the bureaucracy continue about as before.

It is far from an ideal situation, and maybe the campaign will produce better men and policies by the end of the year. Meanwhile the Federal capital probably deserves a better public response than it is getting. It is holding the country together during the political turmoil, for leaving the political struggle aside, the leaders of both parties here are cooperating in the national interest, and concentrating on the things that unite them and have to be done in 1976, rather than on the divisive debates of the candidates, who are vilifying the city they want to take over.