

18 January 1976

Dear Harold:

This note and the attached mini-file of clippings on the Nixon family all are occasioned by your note of 1/9 about the NBC TV newscast you heard which credited Chou En-lai with initiating rapprochement with the United States as early as 1969. This may well be so. I just find no direct evidence of it. You may remember that in the 1968 campaign Nixon hinted that he had a "secret plan" to end the war in Vietnam, and there can be no doubt but that this must have included a rapprochement with China, for security reasons if nothing else. It is quite possible that even that early he had more than the customary Chinese expressions of willingness to talk and come to a reasonable settlement. *made*

The accepted version is that Ed Snow, who was in China during the latter half of 1970, had conversations with Chou as early as August that year and along in October with Mao. What they told him was that China still insisted on recognition of sovereignty over Taiwan, but that a beginning should be made, that it would take time to overcome the wide gap, and, most importantly, Mao told Snow that if any settlement were to be reached with the United States, it would have to be made through Nixon. This did not mean that the Chinese were under any illusions about him or regarded him as any less perfidious than always; it was merely that circumstances were now different. American had to get out of Vietnam, could not leave her rear exposed to a hostile China, and China, for her part, did not want to see the withdrawal of a strong American presence done in such a way that Russia would be tempted to move into the vacuum.

Ed reported this conversation in a December, 1970, issue of Life magazine. His use of Mao's remark that any settlement would have to be reached through Nixon was the central signal. Reinforcing it was Mao's remark that if Nixon wanted to come to China all he had to do was to get on a plane. Whether he talked as President or private citizen did not matter. The important thing was to talk and get down to details.

Actually Mao had sent up an even clearer signal on Oct. 1, when he had Snow and his wife stand at his side on the balustrade at Tien An Men to review the 21st anniversary parade. It was unprecedented.

Despite the setback any possible rapprochement had suffered in March, 1970, with the American invasion of Cambodia, quiet moves continued toward it. Nixon continued certain tension-easing steps such as calling off the Taiwan strait naval patrol and lifting some trade restrictions. The Chinese made their first rather conspicuous response in the spring of 1971 when they surprised everyone by inviting the American pingpong team to Peking, treated them well, and everybody came away glowing.

[It's quite possible somewhere in the background was a 1969 move by Chou to start things moving, possibly through Pakistan. It's just that I can find nothing to bear out the NBC report.]

The next major step was Kissinger's visit during the summer of 1971, which impressed the Chinese partly because it was kept so secret. Their experience with Americans during World War II days had led them to believe that Americans were incapable of keeping anything secret, Ed says.

Chou's role in this whole process was basically that of a vastly experienced man who knew both the Communist and non-Communist world who could reinforce Mao's natural aversion to the Russians, whom ^{Mao} he despised as backsliding Marxists who had degenerated into what looked to him like the same sort of class structure their own revolution had overthrown, and who moreover had withdrawn their aid and technicians in 1960 at a time when China needed them most. Chou was peculiarly suited for such a role. He had come from a wealthy family in central China but had been brought up in Manchuria, where the Russian influence, including the bad behaviour of both the Czarists and the Bolsheviks, were still strong. Chou had lived in both France and Germany, had learned some English during his schoolboy days, and read all those languages in addition to Japanese, as he also had spent a couple of years in Japan. In other words, he had some basis for choice, and his choice was not the Russians as the best of allies. This fitted well into Mao's own more parochial concept of the Russians, which was that of the traditional Chinese who saw them as just more hairy barbarians from the West. This is unfair to the Russians, but is none the less real. The truth is that Mao never would have allied himself to the Russians if there had been any other choice following World War II.

In 1964 China had developed a nuclear bomb and by 1970 had some deterrent capacity as far as Russia was concerned. Also by 1970 the American adventure in Vietnam was clearly a disaster, and Mao made it plain in his interview with Snow that if he negotiated with Nixon it would be from a position of strength. Chou, meanwhile, was clearly intrigued with Kissinger, whom he spoke of as a man who understood both worlds and who should be worthy of negotiating with. That's the general background, and I think it's clear that, whether the NBC report about a Chou initiative in 1969 is correct or not, the rapprochement would have had a much more difficult time getting off the ground than it did. Chou was the expert technician, highly sophisticated, subtle and tireless who made it work. Without his support and expertise with the West, it may be doubted that Mao would have tried it with much hope of success.

So much for that. Now, we have to agree with Bill Safire that the Chinese have send up another strong signal in their reception of David and Julie. At the time Safire wrote his Jan. 12 column (attached) it hadn't yet been reported that within five days after the pair arrived the Chinese had made, developed, processed and distributed all over China a color movie of their visit. This is totally unprecedented, and can mean only that they are still as interested in a rapprochement with the United States as ever and that Nixon is in their minds the symbol of that. Compare this with the correct reception they gave Ford, and it becomes clear that as long as Mao has anything to do with it the rapprochement will go forward just as fast as the Americans can bring themselves to permit it. This for their own reasons, entirely. And, for their own reasons, they will use Nixon if the opportunity presents itself. As Safire points out, Nixon is well aware of what's going on. He may have agreed to stay out of party politics during 1976, but there are other kinds.