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A Matter of Priorities

By Joseph Alsop

WASHINGTON.—There is something almost lunatic, something too strange to be quite rational, in the contrast between the simultaneous discussions of foreign policy here in Washington and out in the country in the political campaign.

Mr. Alsop

In more than a quarter of a century as a political reporter in this city, this correspondent has encountered nothing quite like the mood that has grown up in Washington in the past two months. The long, stirring, impassioned debate that ended at Pearl Harbour, the swift decision that met the challenge in Korea, were dramatic and easy to depict. The new mood has neither of these qualities.

The source of this mood is simple enough. The leading American policy makers, from the President on down, are now convinced it is a much better than even bet that Nikita S. Khrushchev will push the unending Berlin crisis to a hair-raisingly risky climax at some time within the next six months.

The calculations leading to this conviction may be altered next month, if and when Khrushchev comes to this country, for the ostensible purpose of appearing at the UN General Assembly, but for the real purpose of discussing Berlin with the President.

Two Already

Khrushchev, it must be remembered, has already issued two time-limited ultimatums on Berlin, the first in November, 1958, and the second at Vienna in 1960. Both these ultimatums finally proved to be bluffs. The obvious Soviet preparations to push the Berlin crisis to a climax can certainly end the way the ultimatums ended.

But the fact remains that, as of now, the President and his policy makers seriously expect an early and final climax at Berlin. Very few people in the country at large seem to realize this, or to understand the kind of climax that is expected. In brief, what is expected is the kind of Soviet or East German attack on Western rights in Berlin that can only be met by the use of armed force to defend Berlin's freedom.

The question the President and his policy makers have been debating is not whether to use force in these circumstances, but how best to use force. The decision has already been reached to act without British and French support, if this proves necessary, for a prompt, decisive riposte to any challenge to our basic Berlin rights.

Only Chancellor Adenauer can interpose a veto, by specifically asking the United States not to defend Berlin, and by refusing to aid in Berlin's defense. The United States cannot, after all, fight a war in Germany without West German consent. But a West German veto is unthinkable.

This being the approach to the first question, a second question is also being unavoidably discussed. This is the question of whether a battle over the land of air access routes to Berlin will or will not expand into a big, H-bomb war.

Possibility Faced

On balance, the policy makers incline to believe that, if there is a Berlin climax, it will go no further than a final test of the American will to fight, which the Soviets now doubt.

But the possibility that a battle over the land or air access routes will lead on to something far more terrible is never ruled out, because it cannot be. Instead, this possibility is squarely faced, with somber, rather taciturn, resolution.

In truth, except for a brief instant after the Chinese intervention in Korea, this is the only time since the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki that nuclear war has been considered as a distinct, current possibility by the United States government. Mercifully, the possibility is still considered to be fairly slender. Even so, this should be enough to suggest the lunacy of the contrast remarked on above.

While the policy makers accept the actual likelihood that we shall have to use armed force to defend Berlin's freedom, and also face the possibility so grimly inherent in such a use of force, the orators of the campaign are bellowing about Cuba.

Giving Cuba priority over Berlin, at a time when a Berlin crisis appears to be rapidly approaching, is like going all out to treat hursitis while totally neglecting cancer. Cuba is rather like bursitis, in truth, being painful, very irritating, and potentially very inconvenient. Like bursitis, it may need treatment, and perhaps drastic treatment, in the end.

But complicating the dreadfully dangerous Berlin problem by a hairbrained, immediate attack on the Cuban problem would be an action so irresponsible that it deserves to be called criminal. Irresponsibility seems to be spreading, to be sure. The general trend is shown by the many self-righteous denunciations of the attempt to free the Cuban prisoners, for whose plight every American has a share of responsibility.

The President, it must be added, has some blame for this more and more widespread irresponsibility. If he told the country at large what he and his policy makers see in the future, we should be hearing fewer campaign-time imitations of the geese of the Roman Capitol.