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Why the Dither Over Weinberger Letter?

By EDWIN M. YODER JR.

If any doubt lingered that the engine of summit publicity is self-propelling, requiring fuel of the lowest octane, the curious affair of the Weinberger letter would dispel it.

As President Reagan took wing for Geneva last Saturday, the New York Times and the Washington Post broke a leaked "confidential" letter to him from the secretary of defense. The leak plunged the summit party aboard Air Force One into a dither. Yet all it reveals—surprise!—is that Caspar W. Weinberger remains skeptical of the tattered arms-control system negotiated from 1969 on by Presidents Richard M. Nixon, Gerald R. Ford and Jimmy Carter.

That is news of the Earth-is-round variety. Weinberger and his top civilian adviser on arms control, Richard Perle, are known to be devoted foes of arms control—at least in any form that the Soviets might buy. They view anything short of radical paring of the Soviet offensive arsenal as a risky deal, inimical to U.S. security and to the stability of deterrence.

Weinberger also, like Reagan in private moments, believes that the Soviets are compulsive loophole-seekers and, like little boys at the marble ring, will fudge if not watched closely.

These are the views that Weinberger and Perle brought to the Pentagon in 1981. And Weinberger has done everything short of picketing the Oval Office with placards to persuade Reagan (who needs little persuading) of their truth. Despite the pious posturing of the Soviets, who have joined the game of big-time news manage-

ment in Geneva, Weinberger's views are not likely to be news to Mikhail Gorbachev.

And, finally, no one expects Reagan and Gorbachev to negotiate, in detail, over strategic weapons anyway. Gorbachev probably lacks the authority to strike big bargains; Reagan certainly lacks the mastery to do so.

Indeed, Weinberger appears merely to be trying to head off any attack of sentimentality that might prompt Reagan to accede to a "strict" legal interpretation of the 1972 anti-ballistic missile treaty (which could hinder "Star Wars") or a further informal extension of the still-unratified SALT II agreements negotiated by Carter. The Soviets would like both.

So why the dither?

Weinberger's assessment of Moscow's tendency to deviousness may be untimely, but it is, alas, all too accurate. For instance, the Soviets, having agreed not to "undermine" SALT II, are nonetheless encoding some of the signals from their long-range missile tests in order to thwart U.S. electronic surveillance. That's a violation certainly of the spirit and perhaps of the letter of the draft treaty.

Even so, the Weinberger view of arms control and its flaws is far from exhausting all aspects of the issue.

It takes too little account in general of the politics of arms control that, as the recent U.S. dust-up with New Zealand shows, is nudging even solid friends toward nuclear unilateralism. Such is the redundancy of nuclear power on both sides (at least in the view of bystanders) that over-

doing the cheating issue is, or may seem, evasive nit-picking.

Despite the successful deployment last year of a new generation of U.S. "Euro-missiles" in Western Europe, unilateralist fever is latent. The Euro-missile success could be misleading. It could not have been pulled off except that the Soviets, as usual, tried to prevail by bluster and bluff. It has been the salvation of NATO policy that the Soviets are their own worst tacticians, a state of affairs that may not continue under the wily Gorbachev.

From the 1945 days of the Baruch Plan forward, U.S. Presidents have set, and have been expected to set, the pace of risk in nuclear restraint and arms control. The esoteric technicalities in which Weinberger and his aides tend to absorb themselves—again, as a matter of duty—yield an excessively technocratic view of what is at heart a problem in diplomacy and high politics.

Summits, as essentially political exercises, are the diplomats' meat and drink. Thus State Department advice is probably more useful to Ronald Reagan at Geneva than that of the arms technicians.

That realization may explain Weinberger's worry, and even the untimely leaking of his warning letter. It certainly makes good copy. That it should be treated as momentous revelation, however, tells less about "the news" than about our overblown conception of it.

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