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IMPEACHMENT AND THE NUCLEAR TRIGGER

The next few months may see the most powerful man in the world being disgraced, deprived of office, or worse. The mighty have been laid low before, but this time there is a difference: He can punish us more than we can punish him. He can in fact literally destroy most of us, together with the rest of the world.

But -- surely -- it is unthinkable that the President of the United States would take this route: a man who loves his country, a country which elected him to Congress, to the Vice-Presidency, and to the Presidency by an overwhelming majority. And yet -- a country obsessed by petty, murky, little things, showing itself unworthy, kicking around the man who conferred such benefits on it, a country ungrateful and even vicious, deserving what it might get.

It would be so easy, almost a corollary of past policies:

Scenario 1: The North Vietnamese - or their puppets in the South - continue their provocations: an oil depot blown up, a district capital taken, perhaps a small-scale invasion. The South makes a desperate appeal, its survival is threatened. The President warns. The provocations continue. And then(After all, Congress gave me only 90 days to respond.)

Scenario 2: A cold winter. Real hardship in some parts of the country. Rising anger. The President orders the Marines to seize the oilfields of some Arab country. The Russians threaten. And then

Scenario 3: Impeachment trial in progress. The Russians move more ships into the Indian Ocean. We cannot permit them to make major gains while we are preoccupied; we must show them that the President is still Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. Force must be met with force.....

We have already had a Mideast confrontation of sorts, rather mysterious, an unexpected world-wide alert. Perhaps a trial run?

Nor can we assume that our foreign rivals will not take advantage of the apparent disarray caused by an impeachment trial. But whether they do or not is a matter of interpretation -- Presidential interpretation: Is this move a threat to the United States or is it not? and how shall I respond? In the midst of an impeachment trial, would not the President -- in danger of being spurned and rejected by his own country -- would not the President interpret things -- perhaps unconsciously -- in a way that enhances his own role, that makes him seem vital, indispensable, irreplaceable?

People in extremis use the resources they have available. A recent Vice-President in similar circumstances used the threat of tying up the courts to obtain what appears to be a rather light punishment. Tying up the courts -- a mild threat. The President of the United States can do much better. We may be in for some nuclear plea-bargaining. Not in so many words -- that would be self-defeating -- but like this:

Impeachment voted, perhaps trial begins. Crisis begins, getting worse. President must devote his full time to get us out of this mess, is not able to defend himself properly. Unfair. This trial is tearing the country apart, just when we need unity. Suspend it, abort it, acquit! Yes, the President made some mistakes, but we all make mistakes. He's the only President we've got -- Look at all the good he has done. Crisis subsides.....