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And Robert Novak

Mr. Nixon's Challenge To Europe

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One harsh explanation for President Nixon's calculated risk in throwing down the gauntlet to Europe was secret French connivance with certain Arab countries to keep the anti-U.S. oil boycott going. ||

In late January when French foreign minister Michel Jobert was ending his most recent Mideast diplomatic junket, he left this private advice with the Syrian government in Damascus: don't trust the Nixon-Kissinger rhetoric on a political solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict because they are conning the Arabs; don't lift the oil boycott because it is the only cutting edge the Arabs have to pressure the Americans to force Israel out of its vast Arab conquests of 1967.

When word leaked to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's Mideast experts that Jobert had actually lobbied the Syrians to continue the boycott, President Nixon understandably hit the ceiling. Whatever the differences between the U.S. and its European allies over Israel—and those differ-

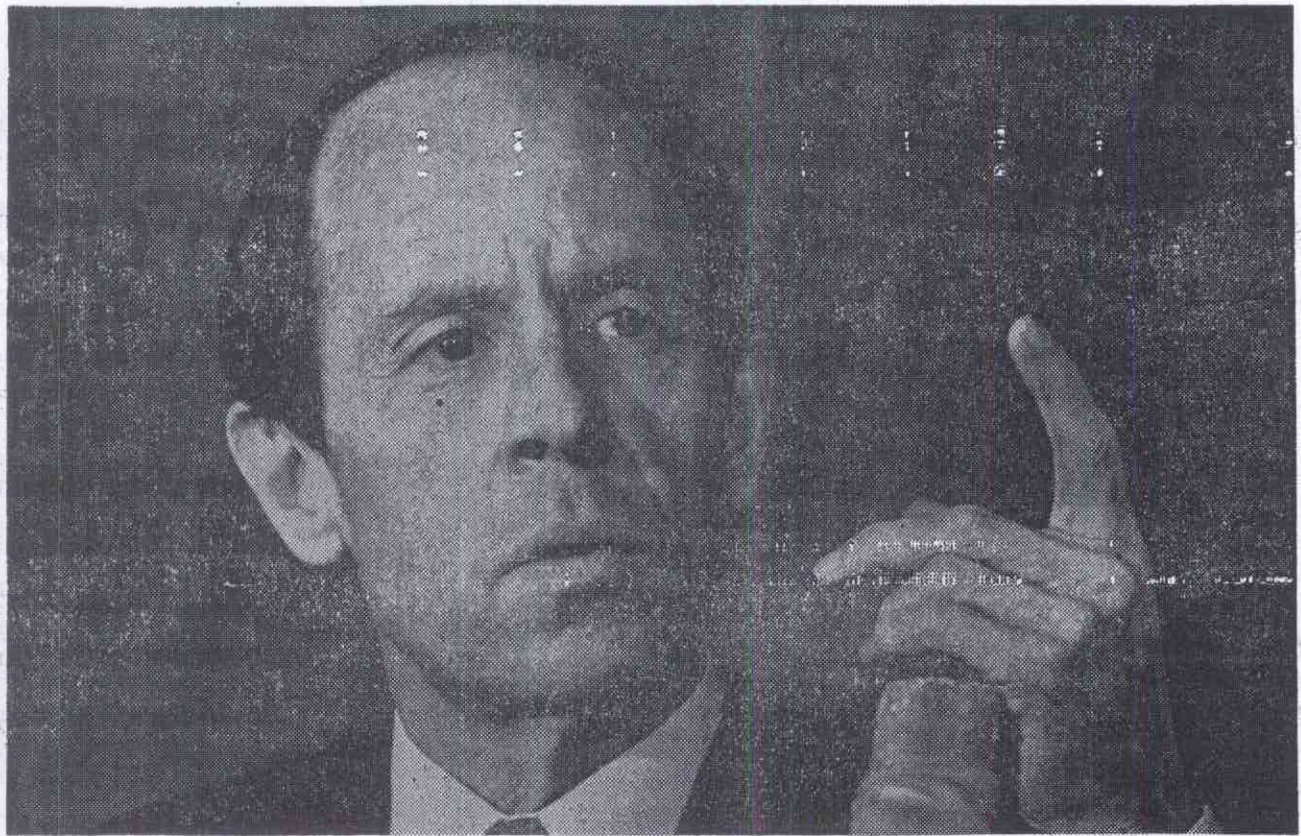
ences have been deep and fundamental—Jobert's sly stabbing at the heart of Kissinger's Mideast diplomacy demanded the most serious American response.

The French, moreover, had also taken the lead—again, behind the American back—in pushing hard for new economic ties between the Europeans and 20 Arab states. When Kissinger stopped in Brussels on March 4 on his way home from the Mideast, he was given tantalizing hints, but no more, that something was brewing between the Europeans and the Arabs. The announcement of the European offer to the Arab states that came almost immediately after he left Brussels stunned the Nixon administration.

This second affront undermines the Nixon-Kissinger effort to bring the big oil-consuming nations together in their economic dealing with the Arab states. Its effect was to outflank the mid-February Washington energy conference, called by Kissinger, and the follow-up conference between the oil-consuming and oil-producing nations. Although the consumer-nation coordinating group has been meeting in Brussels with the U.S. in attendance and will meet again on April 2 to plan for the consumer-producer conference, the French-led European move endangers the whole American plan.

That is the core of explanations behind the President's unexpected March 13 public attack on the Europeans. Although Mr. Nixon seemed almost petulant in his warning about irresistible congressional demands for U.S. troop withdrawal from Europe if the Gallic operations continue, his tough line was carefully planned as a capstone to Kissinger's earlier attacks on the Europeans.

On Tuesday night in Houston, Mr. Nixon was considerably softer. One reason was the initial European government reaction to March 13. Instead of a new load of Gaullist arrogance,



By Frank Johnston—The Washington Post

French Foreign Minister Michel Jobert advised the Syrian government, "Don't lift the oil boycott."

Jobert himself started talking "conciliation." The West Germans, overwhelmingly but privately behind the Americans within the European community, then agreed to finance a much larger portion of the cost of U.S. troops in Europe. Finally, the new Labor government of British Prime Minister Harold Wilson publicly endorsed the U.S. demand (in the phrase of one high U.S. official) for "unity not splitism."

Moreover, Nixon strategists see another potential gain in surfacing the

hard line again Europe: If it works, it shows that in foreign policy Mr. Nixon can still act as President and get away with it.

The risks taken the past 10 days in dramatizing public confrontation with the Europeans are clear from the fact that top officials are comparing it psychologically to the risks of mining Haiphong and bombing Hanoi just before the 1972 Moscow summit. For the French have not yet noticeably changed their basic position of Europe first, the Alliance second. If other

European countries, in their own zeal to preserve European unity, follow the French in future tactics of "splitism," President Nixon has accurately hinted at what will happen here.

In short, Congress will demand radical changes in the alliance which has made Europe safe for the Europeans—and for the Americans—for a quarter of a century. Those changes would transform world politics to the sole benefit of the Soviet Union.

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