

# LBJ on Middle East: 'I

This is the 12th of 15 excerpts from former President Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point," an account of his presidency, to be published shortly.

## "THAWING THE COLD WAR"

A favorite argument of those who opposed our involvement in Vietnam was that the war prevented us from reaching any agreements with the Soviets or resolving areas of difference between Washington and Moscow. Many critics claimed that I was so preoccupied with Southeast Asia that I was neglecting Europe and passing up opportunities to ease Cold War tensions with Russia and Eastern Europe. The Soviet propaganda machine fed this notion, both openly and through informal contacts with individuals. The argument was not true, but few people took the trouble to compare the allegation with the facts.

Once basic agreement was reached on a nonproliferation treaty at the end of 1966, I decided to push hard for the logical and necessary next step — a way to slow the race in strategic arms and eventually, I hoped, to end it. I considered this the most critical issue in Soviet-American relations.

We had known for some time that the Soviets were installing an anti-ballistic missile system around Moscow. Pressure rose for us to follow suit to protect our major cities and ICBM emplacements with an ABM system. It was time, if not past time, for mature men to take stock together on how to achieve mutual security without the huge added costs of elaborate protective systems and the expanded offensive systems they would trigger into being. With this in mind, I wrote to Chairman Kosygin on January 21, 1967. I told the Soviet leader:

I have directed Ambassador Thompson as a matter of first priority to discuss with you and the appropriate members of your Government the possibilities of reaching an understanding between us which would curb the strategic arms race. I think you must realize that following the deployment by you of an anti-ballistic missile system I face great pressures from the Members of Congress and from public opinion not only to deeply defensive systems in this country, but also to increase greatly our capabilities to penetrate any defensive systems which you might establish.

If we should feel compelled to

make such major increases in our strategic weapons capabilities, I have no doubt that you would in turn feel under compulsion to do likewise. We would thus have incurred on both sides colossal costs without substantially enhancing the security of our own peoples or contributing to the prospects for a stable peace in the world.

Five weeks later, on February 27, 1967, Kosygin replied. He said that he and his colleagues were "prepared to continue the exchange of views on questions relating to strategic rocket-nuclear weapons." He promised that they would send additional thoughts on this matter through Ambassador Thompson. "Nor do we exclude the possibility," Kosygin wrote, "of holding in the future, as you suggest, a special meeting of our appropriate representatives for a more detailed discussion of this entire problem."

In spite of these promising words, the Soviets declined during the next several months to name a time or place for serious talks on curbing the missile race. There was evidence that opinion was then divided in the Soviet government on whether, and how, to proceed with missile talks.

I will always have a warm spot in my heart for Dr. Thomas E. Robinson, the President of Glassboro State College, and for his wife. Few people have the kind of patience and consideration they showed when the "invaders" from Washington descended that evening on

their large old stone house called "Hollywood."

We went directly into Dr. Robinson's study, just the two of us and our interpreters. We were to spend most of two working days in that quiet room, discussing the state of the world and its major problems, especially those that concerned us both.

For the most part, Kosygin was reserved but friendly during our long talks. We spoke of our grandchildren and of our hopes that they would grow up in a world of peace. He described his experiences in Leningrad through the long German siege of that great city during World War II. The memory of war's horror was always with the Soviet people, he said, and they wanted nothing but peace.

I picked up his point and reviewed all the steps I had taken as President to lessen Cold War tensions. Now, I

said, it was time to take new steps. I told him that I had been waiting for three months for his answer on starting talks on ABMs and ICBMs. As soon as I brought up strategic arms talks, he changed the subject to the Middle East. This became a pattern during both days of our talks. Each time I mentioned missiles, Kosygin talked about Arabs and Israelis.

At only one point in our first session did Kosygin seem close to becoming really heated. He said we had talked about territorial integrity before the Middle East war, but we had ended by protecting aggression. He insisted that Israeli troops go back to the original armistice lines, and that the question of opening the Gulf of Aqaba be referred to the International Court of Justice. Then, he said, and the implication was "only then," could we discuss other problems. At that point, he came close to issuing a threat. Unless we agreed to his formula, he declared, there would be a war — "a very great war." He said the Arabs would fight with arms if they had them and, if not, with bare hands.

"All troops must be withdrawn at once," he said.

If they fight with weapons, I replied, we would know where they got them. Then I leaned forward and said slowly and quietly: "Let us understand one another. I hope there will be no war. If there is a war, I hope it will not be a big war. If they fight, I hope they fight with fists and not with guns." I told him that I hoped both our countries could keep out of any Middle East explosion because "if we do get into it, it will be a most serious matter."

With the Middle East, Vietnam, and other problem areas in mind, I suggested at our second meeting that we consider setting aside one week a year during which U.S. and Soviet leaders could meet and review all the major issues dividing us. Kosygin noted that we now had the "hot line" and could use that whenever necessary, as we had to good effect during the recent Six Day War. Kosygin apologized for having wakened me so early in the morning through the "hot line." But, he added, together we had "accomplished more on that one day than others could accomplish in three years."

I tried repeatedly to bring the talks back to limiting the missile race. I invited McNamara to join this discussion. At lunch, he and I made the strongest case we could for opening strategic arms talks immediately, but Kosygin apparently had come to Glassboro with a fixation on this subject. Time and time again, he implied that we only wanted to talk about limiting ABMs, while the Soviets felt that ABMs and offensive nuclear weapons should be linked. I reassured him repeatedly that we wanted to limit both offensive and defensive weapons, and McNamara said the same. But the point did not get across clearly — or Kosygin chose not to understand.

That Friday, and when we met again on Sunday, I tried several times to persuade Kosygin to agree to a time and a place for missile limitation talks. "Name the place," I said. "Give us a date — next week, next month. We

will be there. Secretary McNamara is ready now." But it seemed obvious that Kosygin had come without the authority needed from the Soviet Presidium to make a firm commitment. We did promise to continue our search for agreement through talks between Rusk and Gromyko in New York.

I left Glassboro on Sunday evening, June 25, with mixed feelings — disappointment that we had not solved any major problem but hope that we had moved to a better understanding of our differences.

We had been pressing Moscow throughout the summer for a date and a place to begin strategic weapons talks. If anything drastic happened in Czechoslovakia, I knew it would derail, at least for a time, any chance to start strategic weapons talks. But on August 19, 1968, Ambassador Dobrynin called on Rusk to inform him that the Soviet leaders had accepted our long-standing proposal to discuss peaceful uses of nuclear power. They suggested that these talks begin in Moscow on October 15 "or any other date close to that time."

That evening I flew to Detroit to address the National Convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Just before landing, I received word from the White House that the Soviets had just delivered a message to Rusk, which he was forwarding immediately. I delayed leaving the plane until it came. The message said the Soviet leadership was proposing an early announcement to this effect:

An agreement has been reached that the President of the United States Lyndon B. Johnson will visit the Soviet Union in the first decade (first ten days) of October 1968 for the exchange of opinions with the leaders of the USSR on questions of mutual interest.

That night, when I got back to Washington, Rusk and Rostow were waiting for me in the White House. We discussed the Soviet messages, agreed to accept the proposals, and planned to release the news on the morning of August 21.

At our regular Tuesday lunch that day we debated whether the Russians would move against Czechoslovakia, in view of the action they were taking on the talks. Opinions were divided, and I was not completely optimistic. Despite the breakthrough we were preparing to announce the possibility of an invasion was on my mind.

As it turned out, our press release never reached the hands of the reporters. A story that would have produced banner headlines around the world was never written. At 7:06 p.m. on August 20 the phone on my desk rang. Rostow had just received a call from Ambassador Dobrynin, who had been

given a message from the highest level in his government with instructions to deliver it personally to the President. He wanted an appointment at eight o'clock that night. I asked what it was about. Walt said that Dobrynin had not told him.

"What's your guess?" I asked. "Is it Czechoslovakia?"

"It could be," Rostow answered. Walt had been among those who had warned that a Soviet military move there was more likely than not.

"Bring him in at eight," I said. "I'll see him."

That evening I walked into the Cabinet Room, where the Ambassador and Rostow were waiting. We shook hands and sat down, I in my regular chair, the Ambassador directly across the table, and Rostow at my left, taking notes.

The Ambassador was obviously tense. I tried to relax him by recalling our meeting at Glassboro. I had seen color movies of that event just the night before, I said. I told him that after watching Kosygin with the friendly crowd at Glassboro "you would have thought he was a county judge in New Jersey or a Senator." Dobrynin smiled and began to look a little more relaxed.

We talked a few minutes more, then the Ambassador's face turned serious once again. "Now, Mr. President," he said, "I have an urgent instruction from my government to tell you about serious business. I will read it."

He then proceeded to read a long statement:

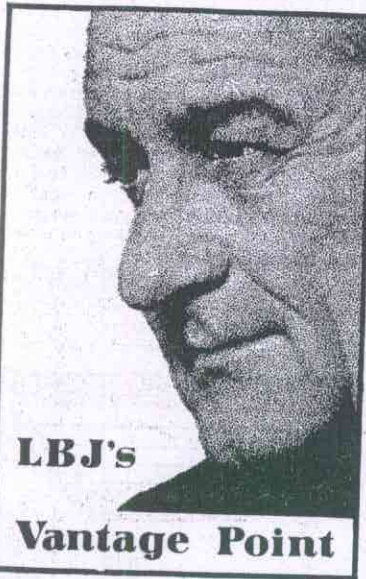
The Government of the Soviet Union considers it necessary to inform, personally, President Johnson about the following. In connection with the further aggravation of the situation which was created by a conspiracy of the external and internal forces of aggression against the existing social order in Czechoslovakia and against the statehood established by the constitution of that country, the Government of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic approached the allied states, the Soviet Union among them, with a request of rendering direct assistance, including the assistance by military forces.

He went on reading the message, which tried to justify the Soviet action. It concluded with this statement:

We proceed from the fact that the current events should not harm Soviet-American relations, to the development of which the Soviet Government as before attaches great importance.

"This," Dobrynin said, "is what I was asked to tell you."

Later that night I sat at the Cabinet table once again with the Vice Presi-



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## **Vantage Point**

dent, Dean Rusk, Clark Clifford, CIA Director Helms, General Wheeler, and a few others to assess at length this latest development. I concluded that there was nothing we could do immediately about the Czech situation, but I instructed Rusk to call in Dobrynin that same night and tell him that there would be no announcements about my visiting the Soviet Union or the technical nuclear talks.

After our meeting, I called the Republican Presidential candidate, Richard Nixon, in New York City. I had promised to keep him informed of all major developments, and since Vice President Humphrey had been in the meeting, I thought Nixon should know what had happened. I explained how near we had come with the Soviets to strategic arms talks and discussions of peaceful uses of nuclear power. And I informed him of the Czech situation and Dobrynin's call. He was grateful for the information, he said, and assured me that he would say nothing that would make my job more difficult.

"You know how I feel," he said. "The hell with the election. We must all stand firm on this."

In the wake of their callous, outrageous assault on Czechoslovakia, the Russians began pressing harder for a summit meeting and nuclear arms talks, probably feeling that these discussions would soften the criticism Moscow was getting around the world. For our part, we waited for withdrawal of Warsaw Pact forces from Czechoslovakia and a quieting of the atmosphere in Central Europe.

In preparation for our meetings and

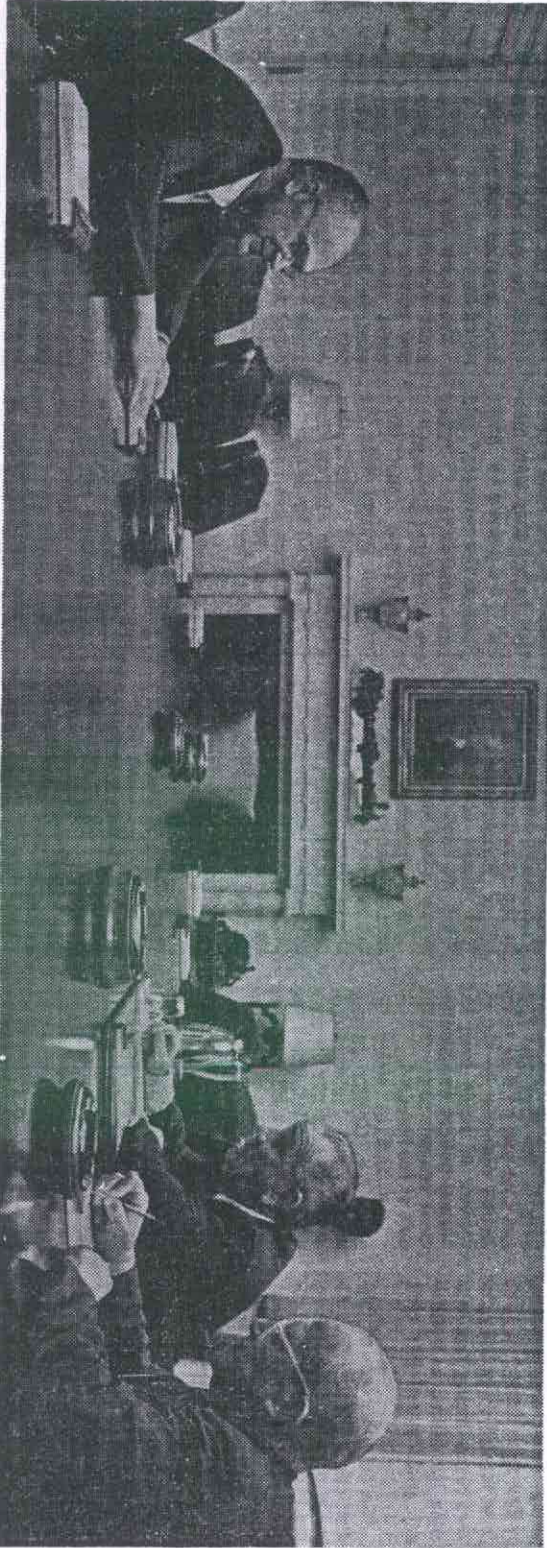
talks with Moscow, we had worked out the following formula. First, there would be an exchange of technical papers in which we and the Soviets would set forth our general positions on limiting strategic arms, offensive and defensive. Second, the Soviet leaders and I would meet at the summit conference and try to reach agreement on broad principles to guide the negotiators on both sides. We would also discuss other world problems at the meeting, especially the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Finally, there would be a continuation of the technical negotiations based on the agreed principles, but under the full control of the new President.

After the November elections, I understood fully that President-elect Nixon and his advisers would want time to study these complicated plans before committing themselves to a final position. But I was certain that the format we had worked out would protect them. The technical negotiations after the summit meeting would be fully in their hands. I proposed that the President-elect go with me to the meeting. Mr. Nixon considered the possibility and finally decided against it. I suggested then that he choose a trusted adviser to go with me as an observer and full participant in the talks. He tentatively selected retired diplomat Robert D. Murphy for this assignment.

At the end of November 1968, in a final effort to launch the strategic arms limitation talks, we sent a message to Ambassador Thompson in Moscow authorizing him to suggest a summit meeting in Geneva just before Christmas. He made that suggestion to Gromyko on November 29. The Soviet diplomat said he could not comment at that time, but his reaction indicated that the Soviet leadership still had a possible meeting in mind. In the next ten days, however, Moscow's attitude cooled noticeably. Thompson had difficulty reaching Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin, who had returned to Moscow for consultation. When they finally met, it appeared that Soviet interest in a meeting had almost disappeared.

Dobrynin told Thompson that if I decided not to go ahead with the meeting "that would be understood in Moscow and there would be no hard feelings." When I received the report from Thompson, I wrote in pencil at the bottom: "I'm ready! Are they?" Everything we learned indicated that they were not. I believed the Soviet leaders had been persuaded that it made more sense for them to deal with the incoming administration. I had a strong feeling that they were encouraged in that view by people who were very close to the incoming administration.

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Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin (left) tells President Johnson about the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Walt Rostow is at Mr. Johnson's left, taking notes.

—Photo by Frank Wolfe