

# Day the Hot Line Rang: A Crisis in the Mideast

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

## "THE SIX-DAY WAR"

Just before eight o'clock on the morning of June 5, 1967, the telephone rang in my bedroom at the White House. Bob McNamara was calling with a message never heard before by an American President. "Mr. President," he said, "the hot line is up."

The hot line is a special teletype circuit linking Moscow and Washington. The technicians call it Molink. Its purpose is to provide instant communications between the Soviet leaders and the American President in times of grave crisis in order to minimize the dangers of delay and misunderstanding.

McNamara's words were ominous, given the background against which they were spoken. Three and one-half hours before, at 4:35 a.m., Walt Rostow had awakened me with the news that war had erupted in the Middle East.

On May 14, 1967, Nasser mobilized his armed forces. Two days later Egypt asked the United Nations to withdraw its peacekeeping force in the Sinai. In an action that shocked me then, and that still puzzles me, Secretary General U Thant announced that UN forces could not remain in the Sinai without Egyptian approval. Even the



**LBJ's  
Vantage Point**

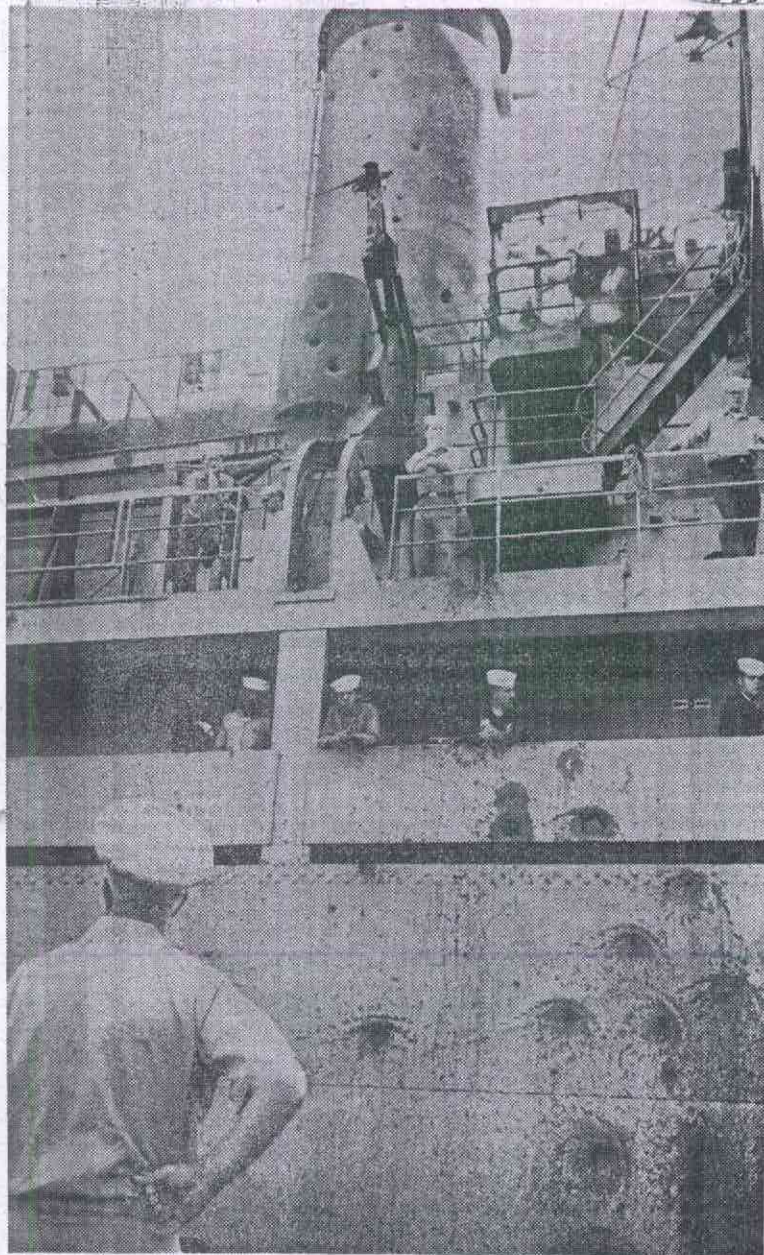
Egyptians were surprised. Nasser's Ambassador in Washington told us that his government thought and hoped that U Thant would play for time. But he did not, and tension increased.

I knew that on February 26, 1967, See JOHNSON, A14, Col. 1



X. R. OKOMOTO  
Johnson and his advisers in the Situation Room after Moscow activated the Hotline before the Mideast War.

10/24/21



U.S. Navy Photo

**The bullet-scarred USS Liberty arrives at Malta.**

## JOHNSON, From AI

Secretary of State Dulles had informed President Eisenhower in a memorandum "that Israel had been assured that a purpose of the United Nations Emergency Force would be to restrain the exercise of belligerent rights which would prevent passage through the Straits of Tiran." I wanted to know precisely how Eisenhower had viewed the matter at that time, so I sought his views and invited any statement he might care to make. General Eisenhower sent me a message stating his view that the Israelis' right of access to the Gulf of Aqaba was definitely part of the "commitment" we had made to them.

On the evening of May 26 I met with Israel's Foreign Minister Abba Eban, who had just flown to Washington. Our conversation was direct and frank. Eban said that according to Israeli intelligence, the United Arab Republic (UAR) was preparing an all-out attack. I asked Secretary McNamara, who was present, to give Mr. Eban a summary of our findings. Three separate intelligence groups had looked carefully into the matter, McNamara said, and it was our best judgment that a UAR attack was not imminent. "All of our intelligence people are unanimous," I added, "that if the UAR attacks, you will whip hell out of them."

Eban asked what the United States was willing to do to keep the Gulf of Aqaba open. I reminded him that I had defined our position on May 23. We were hard at work on what to do to assure free access, and when to do it. "You can assure the Israeli Cabinet," I said, "we will pursue vigorously any and all possible measures to keep the strait open."

I pointed out that we had to try to work through the United Nations first. "If it should become apparent that the UN is ineffective," I said, "then Israel and her friends, including the United States, who are willing to stand up and be counted can give specific and indication of what they can do."

I told him that I saw some hope in

the plan for an international naval force in the strait area, but that before such a proposal could be effective I had to be sure Congress was on board. "I am fully aware of what three past Presidents have said," I told Eban, "but that is not worth five cents if the people and the Congress do not support the President." I knew from bitter experience that the situation would be worse if the Congress started out supporting Israel and then found excuses to turn tail and run if the going got rough. Some Senators who had been in the vanguard with me on Southeast Asia were already looking for a storm cellar, and I did not want a repetition of this faintheartedness in the Middle East.

Abba Eban is an intelligent and sensitive man. I wanted him to understand the U.S. position fully and clearly, and to communicate what I said to his government. "The central point, Mr. Minister," I told him, "is that your nation not be the one to bear the responsibility for any outbreak of war." Then I said very slowly and very positively: "Israel will not be alone unless it decides to go alone."

Before U.S. military forces could be involved in any way, I was determined to ask Congress for a resolution supporting such a move. I was convinced that Congress would approve the resolution if there seemed to be no alternative, but such a vote of confidence would not be easy to obtain. There were those on Capitol Hill who would willingly exploit the situation for political advantage. In a joint memorandum to me Rusk and McNamara observed: "While it is true that many Congressional Vietnam doves may be in the process of conversion to Israeli hawks . . . an effort to get a meaningful resolution from the Congress runs the risk of becoming bogged down in acrimonious dispute."

At the very least, I knew that the Congress would not move until we had exhausted all other diplomatic remedies, through the United Nations and outside it. This was also true of the

White House. I was opposed to using force until I was persuaded that every other avenue was blocked. And we were moving rapidly to explore every possibility.

With the British, we sought widespread support for a declaration affirming the right of innocent passage through the Gulf of Aqaba. This was slow work. By June 4 only eight countries had agreed, and they included the United States, Great Britain, and Israel. The others were the Netherlands, Australia, Iceland, Belgium, and New Zealand. Five other nations — West Germany, Argentina, Portugal, Canada, and Panama — were still studying the proposition, but we felt they were nearing agreement.

During that final weekend of uneasy quiet Rusk sent cables to all our Ambassadors in Arab capitals urging them to "put your minds to possible solutions which can prevent war." He informed the Ambassadors that we had thus far been able to convince the Israelis to hold back, but that they might be nearing a decision to use force. "It will do no good," his message said, "to ask Israel simply to accept the present status quo in the Strait, because Israel will fight and we cannot restrain her. We cannot throw up our hands and say, in that event, let them fight while we try to remain neutral." The central point involving the United States, the message said, was this: "We cannot abandon, in principle, the right of Israeli flagships to transit the Strait."

McNamara's call brought the news that the hot line was activated. I later learned that when McNamara heard Moscow was calling on the hot line, he instructed his communications people to pipe it into the White House. To his amazement, they advised him that it could not be done — that the hot line ended at the Pentagon. McNamara said sharply that with all the money we had invested in military communications there must be some way to send Moscow's message directly to the White House Situation Room, and they had better figure it out. They quickly found a way.



Photo by Y. R. Okamoto

Abba Eban warns Johnson of an impending attack by the United Arab Republic.

I was informed that Chairman Kosygin was at the Kremlin end. He had agreed to wait until I was on hand before sending his message. I went quickly to the Situation Room, joining Rusk, McNamara, and Rostow. Kosygin's message began to arrive in a matter of minutes.

It expressed Soviet concern over the fighting. Kosygin said that the Russians intended to work for a ceasefire and that they hoped we would exert influence on Israel. I replied, in part, that we would use all our influence to bring hostilities to an end, and that we were pleased the Soviets planned to do the same.

Our problems that day were complicated by an error made by a briefing officer in the State Department. Pressed for a statement of American policy, he began well: "I am in no position to speak specifically beyond the President's statement of May 23." But as he continued, speaking in the context of anti-American riots in Arab countries and of danger to American citizens there, he said: "Our position is neutral in thought, word, and deed." Perhaps the remark was designed to reassure the Arabs that we were not engaged in the hostilities, but within minutes those words were carried in

radio news bulletins to an unbelieving nation. The statement was an oversimplified approach to a complicated situation. We were certainly not belligerents, but our successive guarantees since 1950 to the independence and territorial integrity of all the states in the area made "neutral" the wrong word. This remark stirred unnecessary resentment among many Americans. Later in the day, in the White House Fish Room, Secretary Rusk put the matter straight by recounting the history of our Middle East commitments and our active role in searching for peace through the United Nations at that very moment.

The next day, June 6, also began with activation of the hot line. I went to the Situation Room at 6:40 a.m. Already assembled there were the Vice President, Secretaries Rusk and McNamara, Nicholas Katzenbach, Walt Rostow, McGeorge Bundy, Clark Clifford (then Chairman of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board), and Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson, who had come from Moscow for consultation.

I spent many hours in the Situation Room throughout the Middle East crisis. During some very trying days the

room served as headquarters for the U.S. Government. On this particular occasion, as we sat around the conference table at dawn, Lady Bird brought breakfast to us.

Thursday, June 8, began on a note of tragedy. A morning news bulletin reported that a U.S. Navy communications ship, the *Liberty*, had been torpedoed in international waters off the Sinai coast. For seventy tense minutes we had no idea who was responsible, but at eleven o'clock we learned that the ship had been attacked in error by Israeli gunboats and planes. Ten men of the *Liberty* crew were killed and a hundred were wounded. This heart-breaking episode grieved the Israelis deeply, as it did us. There was a possibility that the incident might lead to even greater misfortune, and it was precisely to avoid further confusion and tragedy that I sent a message to Chairman Kosygin on the hot line. I told him exactly what had happened and advised him that carrier aircraft were on their way to the scene to investigate. I wanted him to know, I said, that investigation was the sole purpose of these flights, and I hoped he would inform the proper parties. Kosygin replied that our message had been relayed immediately to the Egyptians.

Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson reported, after his return to Moscow, that this particular exchange had made a deep impression on the Russians. Use of the hot line for this purpose, to prevent misunderstanding, was exactly what both parties had envisioned.

On the morning of June 10 we thought we could see the end of the road. But new word from Moscow brought a sudden chill to the situation. I was told that the hot line was active again, and that "Mr. Kosygin wants the President to come to the equipment as soon as possible." I hurried to the Situation Room. Already there were Rusk, McNamara, Rostow, Thompson, Christian, and CIA Director Helms. At 9:05 a.m. I received the first rough translation of the Kosygin message.

The Soviets accused Israel of ignoring all Security Council resolutions for a ceasefire. Kosygin said a "very crucial moment" had now arrived. He spoke of the possibility of "independent decision" by Moscow. He foresaw the risk of a "grave catastrophe" and stated that unless Israel unconditionally halted operations within the next few hours, the Soviet Union would take "necessary actions, including military." Thompson, at Rusk's request, read the original Russian text to make certain that the word "military" was indeed the correct translation. Thompson said it was. In an exchange between heads of government, these were serious words: "very crucial moment," "catastrophe," "independent decision," "military actions."

The room was deathly still as we carefully studied this grave communi-

cation. I turned to McNamara. "Where is the Sixth Fleet now?" I asked him. I knew our ships were circling somewhere in the Mediterranean but I wanted to know the exact location.

McNamara picked up the phone and spoke into it. Then, cradling the phone, he said to me: "It is approximately three hundred miles west of the Syrian coast."

"How fast do these carriers normally travel?" I asked.

"About twenty-five knots. Traveling normally, they are some ten to twelve hours away from the Syrian coast," McNamara said.

We knew that Soviet intelligence ships were electronically monitoring the fleet's every movement. Any change in course or speed would be signaled instantly to Moscow. There are times when the wisdom and rightness of a President's judgment are critically important. We were at such a moment. The Soviets had made a decision. I had to respond.

The fleet was under orders to stay at least one hundred miles from the Syrian coast in its cruising pattern. I told McNamara to issue orders at once to change the course and cut the restriction to fifty miles. The Secretary of Defense gave the orders over the phone. No one else said a word.

We all knew the Russians would get the message as soon as their monitors observed the change in the fleet's pattern. That message, which no transla-

tor would need to interpret to the Kremlin leadership, was that the United States was prepared to resist Soviet intrusion in the Middle East. But I had to reply directly to Chairman Kosygin. I knew my message must be temperate and factual.

Throughout the morning I had additional exchanges with the Chairman over the hot line. Kosygin's messages later in the morning became more temperate. Israel and Syria moved to a ceasefire. The tension in the Situation Room subsided. My last message to Chairman Kosygin went over the hot line just before noon. I pointed out that military action in the Middle East was apparently ending. I expressed my hope that the efforts of both our countries in the time ahead would be devoted to achieving lasting peace throughout the world.

The hot line proved a powerful tool not merely, or even mainly, because communications were so rapid. The overriding importance of the hot line was that it engaged immediately the heads of government and their top advisers, forcing prompt attention and decisions. There was unusual value in this, but also danger. We had to weigh carefully every word and phrase. I took special pains not only to handle this crisis deliberately but to set a quiet, unhurried tone for all our discussions.

From the book, THE VANTAGE POINT, Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969, by Lyndon Baines Johnson, published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. Copyright 1971 by HEC Public Affairs Foundation.

## 'Prosperity Did Not Depend' On Continued Hostilities

Looking back over those days late in 1965, I thought that if I had it to do over again I would not have changed much. I would have made the same decision to recommend a guns-and-butter budget to the Congress, and I still would have ignored the counsel of those who called for a breathing spell in the enactment of new legislation. Nothing in the intervening years has changed my mind on those two points.\*

The guns-and-butter policy created several problems—particularly, a tendency to heat up the economy. Clearly the increase in defense spending for Vietnam subjected the economy to the strains of inflation, and this situation was sharply intensified by the failure of the Congress to move promptly on the tax bill. But against this fact was another important consideration: The percentage of our gross national product devoted to defense spending, including all the costs of Vietnam, ranged from 8 to 10 per cent, compared with 13 per cent during the Korean War and around 10 per cent during the peacetime years of the mid-1950s.

What was clear above all was that our sustained prosperity did not de-

pend on the continuation of hostilities; the costs of conflict were an additional burden, not a supporting foundation, and in my judgment they were not an inhibiting factor on our domestic programs. I remained convinced that we had the resources to meet our commitments abroad while we continued economic and social reforms at home.

I was never convinced that Congress would have voted appreciably more funds for domestic programs if there had been no struggle in Southeast Asia. If we had succeeded in stilling the guns in Vietnam, as we tried so desperately to do, I believe that many Congressmen would have demanded tax reductions rather than providing increased funds for the beleaguered cities.

Some of those who were most vocal in 1965 in calling for a legislative breathing spell were the very ones who were to call for a \$100 billion "Marshall Plan" to rebuild our decaying cities several years later. Had we listened to their advice in 1965, we would not even have made a start in such programs as Model Cities, urban housing, the eradication of rats, and mess transportation.