Watergate Impact: The Kremlin's Evidence

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In a column today on this page, Victor Zorza marshals persuasive evidence that President Nixon, by overstatements in his Oct. 26 press conference, may have pushed the Kremlin into its first public doubts about whether his political survival is either likely or desirable. The evidence suggests that the Russians, walking out a door carefully left open by Secretary Kissinger on Oct. 25 (the day of the alert of U.S. forces), eased off their indirect threat to intervene in the Mideast; Mr. Brezhnev quickly followed by reaffirming his personal commitment to detente. At his news conference of Oct. 26, however, Mr. Nixon portrayed the Soviet maneuvering as a threat which almost certainly would have materialized if he had not brandished "the power of the United States" by putting our forces on alert and responding with strong words. Mr. Brezhnev then angrily denounced the American alert and loosed the Soviet press to start discussing the chances of Mr. Nixon's impeachment.

What is most troubling about this sequence is that Mr. Nixon's contribution to it at his news conference seems to have had no real diplomatic purpose; rather his comments on his own diplomatic prowess came in the context of a claim to coolness under fire and of an argument that preoccupation with Watergate had not deterred him from dealing firmly with a foreign threat. He is entitled to high marks, pending disclosure of the full record, for meeting what seemed to be a dangerous crisis. But at his news conference, he did not have to make it seem that he had demanded and received a personal retreat by Mr. Brezhnev—and not for the first time—in the face of his own skill, boldness and determination. For if anything at all should have been learned from the long and nervous history of super-power confrontation, it is that direct challenges to national pride or leadership prestige on the other side should be avoided. In a word: no gloating—or boasting. This is the rule Mr. Nixon broke on Oct. 26.

That the Kremlin responded so sharply and that it promptly opened up public Soviet discussion of Mr. Nixon's possible departure from office does not mean, of course, that the Russians have given up on either Mr. Nixon or detente. It does mean the Kremlin has posted a clear warning that by its lights Mr. Nixon is not in all circumstances the indispensable man. Until now it has been at least plausible for the President to contend that his domestic woes had not influenced his capacity to conduct foreign policy. That contention is the weaker for his loose talk of Oct. 26.

Victor Zorza fwt 11/7/73

Soviet Press Unleashed On Talk of Impeachment

The Kremlin's decision to allow the Soviet press to talk about the impeachment of the President and Watergate generally means that the Soviet leaders are beginning to have doubts about the chances—and desirability—of Mr. Nixon's survival.

As long as the Kremlin thought that Mr. Nixon was unalterably committed to a policy of detente, it was prepared to suppress any criticism of him. But evidently the Kremlin was greatly disturbed by Mr. Nixon's role in the worldwide alert of U.S. forces.

Even Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's first press conference announcing and explaining the alert caught the Kremlin on the wrong foot. The first version of the remarks he made on that crowded Thursday morning was not released by Tass, the official news agency, until midnight Moscow time, while the Kremlin was considering how to handle the whole matter.

Dr. Kissinger's statement was composed with great deliberation as a variation on two themes. On the one hand, he spoke of the risks that the Russians were running by appearing to threaten intervention in the Mideast. He made it clear that the United States was determined to prevent such intervention, even if it was presented under the guise of a joint Soviet-U.S. force.

On the other hand, he stressed that the Kremlin had so far taken no irrevocable action and that there was no need for it to back down. The crisis would be over as soon as Moscow had signified its support for the Security Council resolution on a U.N. peacekeeping force.

Kissinger was leaving the Russians a way of retreat. They promptly took it during the Security Council vote. The Tass version of his remarks omitted all mention of the alert, of its causes, all indication of any crisis between the two superpowers—which is what the press conference had been all about. The Kremlin, in other words, didn't want a crisis and made it disappear by refusing to admit there was one. The only discordant note re-played by Tass was Kissinger's rejection of a joint Soviet-U.S. force.

But the Kremlin debate evidently

continued, for even this Tass release was withdrawn, leaving next day's Moscow's papers without any word of Kissinger's momentous statement. The direction in which the Kremlin was moving was evident from the second Tass version released to the papers later. It dropped the discordant note and was extensively rewritten to put even more emphasis on the wholly pacific side of Kissinger's remarks. Any lingering fears in the Kremlin that the United States might welcome a confrontation to blot out Watergate had evidently been removed.

Only then did Party Secretary Leonid Brezhnev make his first public statement on the crisis. He was even more pacific than Kissinger at his best. He still refused to acknowledge the alert or the crisis, apart from a reference to "fantastic speculation" designed to fan passions "in some NATO countries"—not specifically the United States.

Brezhnev reaffirmed his commitment to Nixon and to his detente policies. He looked forward to the President's 1974 visit to Moscow and paid tribute to those Western statesmen who were working to overcome the "inertia" of the cold war. He dropped some broad hints to suggest that he would welcome a constructive response from the President.

During his own press conference that evening, Mr. Nixon stressed the value of detente in overcoming the Mideast crisis—but he threw a bucket of ice-cold water over Brezhnev's head. For Nixon made it clear that Brezhnev had backed down in the face of the determination and the power of the President of the United States.

The Soviet Union had been planning to send "a very substantial force" to the Mideast," he said, but after some "rather rough" communications which left "little to the imagination" on both sides, a settlement was reached. Why? "What Mr. Brezhnev does understand is the power of the United States," Mr. Nixon said.

Brezhnev also knew, he emphasized, that even when the President was under "unmerciful assault, during previous crises, he "still went ahead and did what was right." And he recalled the other occasions when Brezhnev had backed down—the invasion of Cambodia, the bombing and mining of North Vietnam just before last year's Moscow summit, and the final bombing of Hanoi just before Christmas. "This," Mr. Nixon concluded, "is what made Mr. Brezhnev act as he did."

This is what Mr. Brezhnev heard as he waited, into the small hours of the morning Moscow time, to hear Mr. Nixon's response to his own elaborately friendly speech of the previous day. He angrily authorized Tass to release—at half past six in the morning—his own response, which described the Washington claims about the reasons for the alert as "absurd" and the alert itself as an attempt to "intimidate" the Soviet Union. It was only after this that the Soviet press began to discuss the possibility of impeachment.

The sequence of events, and the contrast between Dr. Kissinger's and Mr. Nixon's handling of them re-awakened old fears in the Kremlin. It evidently concluded that Mr. Nixon may abandon detente, in order to re-emerge as the "strong man" that the country would have to keep in the White House to protect it from the Russians.