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The Watergate Summit

Watergate, after a considerable lag, now has begun to impinge increasingly on President Nixon's ability to conduct the nation's foreign policy.

The White House chief of staff, Alexander Haig, drew a contrary conclusion from the President's Paris visit last weekend. "A viable Presidency is a cornerstone of world security," Mr. Haig said, drawing the questionable conclusion that the viability of the Nixon Presidency was demonstrated by Mr. Nixon's reception in Paris. But Mr. Haig's judgment was premature. Mr. Nixon's diplomatic conferences and street appearances have come under bitter criticism in France as unseemly at a time of memorial services for the late President Pompidou. The charge is made that this activity was designed to counter Watergate by providing evidence of the President's continued influence abroad.

Even more important is the acknowledgement by Secretary of State Kissinger's chief Soviet adviser that Watergate played a negative role during Mr. Kissinger's recent talks — and many diplomatic disappointments — in Moscow. State Department Counselor Helmut Sonnenfeldt indicated that Soviet leaders, as a result of Watergate, hesitate to enter into new agreements with the Nixon Administration. They "are biding their time and checking their bidding a bit," he said, concerned whether the President can carry out agreements that require Congressional approval.

Congressional resistance on trade agreements made by Mr. Nixon two years ago was mentioned by Mr. Sonnenfeldt as a specific example. But a second strategic arms limitation treaty (SALT II) would also require Congressional approval. Mr. Kissinger's biggest disappointment was his inability to make an agreed "conceptual breakthrough" with the Russians on SALT II.

Soviet Communist party Secretary Brezhnev and Mr. Nixon both seem determined to maintain the détente atmosphere and to proceed with Mr. Nixon's Moscow visit this summer. But that does not assure the conclusion of important agreements.

The danger in regard to SALT is not, as some suppose, that a weakened Nixon will sacrifice American interests to obtain a Moscow agreement as a counter to Watergate. The real danger is that a reasonable SALT II agreement will be attacked even more violently than the reasonable SALT I agreement. Mr. Brezhnev or Mr. Nixon, or both, might prefer to delay a SALT II agreement rather than have it repudiated by the United States Senate.

The American national interest, however, lies in achieving a SALT II agreement this year. Otherwise, the approaching Soviet deployment of newly-developed MIRV multiple warhead missiles could take the arms race past another critical point of no return. If that deployment pattern is not limited in advance by mutual agreement, a further American buildup and a new spiral in the arms race will be hard to avoid.

All this points to a need for the Congress to proceed with all deliberate speed in resolving the Watergate debate. That would be so even if Mr. Nixon were not planning a Moscow trip this summer. But the prospect of that voyage and the need for a new SALT pact make it more desirable than ever that the national political crisis be resolved before many more months have gone by.