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Snubbing Solzhenitsyn

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President Ford's belated, backhanded invitation to Alexander Solzhenitsyn, rejected with deserved contempt by the Russian Nobel laureate, concludes a dreary sequence of events suggesting thorny problems amid today's rosy euphoria at the White House.

The President's treatment of Solzhenitsyn reflected qualities more typical of Richard M. Nixon than Gerald R. Ford: lack of informed political consultation, gross insensitivity, equivocal explanations, just plain bad manners.

The affair seems so out of character for Mr. Ford that it points to pervasive foreign policy influence over the President by Dr. Henry Kissinger, wearing dual hats as Secretary of State and national security adviser. Kissinger's use of that influence to reinforce his often dogmatic concept of detente has now led Mr. Ford into the Solzhenitsyn thicket and could lead him into trouble on far larger issues.

Kissinger exerted his influence in a personal memorandum to the President last month stating it would be politically inadvisable for him to attend the AFL-CIO banquet honoring Solzhenitsyn here June 30. The memo added, however, it would be acceptable for Mr. Ford to meet the great anti-Communist novelist at some White House reception. The converse, by implication: a private Ford-Solzhenitsyn meeting would not be acceptable. At the same time, the State Department quietly barred all its officials from attending the dinner.

None of the senior officials who would have urged Mr. Ford to see the Russian—including top White House aide Donald Rumsfeld and Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger—was consulted. The matter was not brought up at a National Security Council meeting.

Sen. Jesse Helms, the right-wing Republican from North Carolina, next asked the White House to arrange a Ford-Solzhenitsyn meeting for June 30. Partly because Helms is held in low regard at the White House, the President quickly rejected him.

Following Kissinger's advice, the President stayed away from the AFL-CIO dinner. Some administration notables—Schlesinger, Secretary of Labor John Dunlop, United Nations Ambassador Daniel P. Moynihan, Deputy Disarmament Director John Lehman—followed their consciences and attended. Even one or two lower-level State Department officials defied the Kissinger edict.

Those who attended, particularly Moynihan, were sharply criticized within the State Department. But the administration soon faced deeper trouble. To the surprise of the White House, outrage was growing over the President's snub of Solzhenitsyn—particularly among Republican conservatives.

Mississippi Republican State Chairman Clarke Reed wrote a scathing letter to Rumsfeld asking whether Schlesinger would be fired for attending the dinner and thereby committing "detente deviationism." Ronald Reagan delivered his first personal attack on Mr. Ford in his weekly syndicated column.

Belatedly alarmed, senior presidential aides discussed Solzhenitsyn daily last week, finally agreeing last Friday that Mr. Ford should tell his Saturday press conference in Chicago he would see Solzhenitsyn if the novelist requested a meeting. When no reporter asked the proper question, the President issued a statement at 6 p.m. Saturday which was predictably ignored. On NBC's "meet the Press" Sunday, Solzhenitsyn brushed the half-hearted invitation aside by saying he did not

come to America to talk to government officials.

That still leaves the question of why the President would not eagerly greet a legitimate international hero. Background statements of high officials that Solzhenitsyn is a non-Westernized Slavic mystic explain nothing.

Nor does the theory that Kissinger really feared Russia's most prominent anti-Communist turning up in the Oval Office would wreck detente. Although administration hard-liners believe Kissinger thinks detente is much too fragile, the Secretary of State knows better than anybody else that the Kremlin's grand strategy cannot be aborted by Washington atmospherics.

Rather, the snub may be explained by the major, still private criticism of Kissinger within the administration: He has become too accustomed to close collaboration with Chairman Leonid Brezhnev and lesser Soviet leaders. To socialize with the Soviet regime's blood enemy would be discourteous to friendly adversaries. Soviet leaders say blandly they would never entertain American Communist Angela Davis at the Kremlin. So, some U.S. officials privately equate treatment of Miss Davis there and Solzhenitsyn here, a ridiculous comparison that robs anti-communism of all ideological content.

The Solzhenitsyn affair hurts Mr. Ford on the Republican right just when he most wants conservative backing against Reagan, but the matter probably will soon be forgotten.

Some high officials, however, see a broader question which will not soon be forgotten: whether Kissinger's control over U.S. policy in pursuit of detente will be challenged in the debate over arms control now entering a critical stage in Geneva, with the widest possible political repercussions.