

Mideast Crisis: The Watergate Connection . . .

Dox 10/26/73

Maneuvering on behalf of their Arab clients, the Soviets pushed hard—and the United States pushed back hard in return. That would appear to be about the size of it, judging by events and also by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's cogent review yesterday of a tense 12 hours in the on-going crisis in the Mideast. By his account, the United States picked up disturbing evidence a day or so ago of Russian preparation for some sort of unilateral military intervention in the Mideast war. By alerting our forces and firmly stating our position we sent back evidence of our resolve which presumably was equally sobering to the Soviets. There was no real confrontation, Mr. Kissinger said; nothing irrevocable was said or done by either side. In short, nothing happened that was essentially inconsistent with any realistic definition of the detente which is supposed to have grown up between us and the Russians—a point which is developed in greater detail in a second editorial in this space today.

How close we may have come to a real confrontation with the Russians, and how close the world may have come to nuclear war, is something else again. We may never know—although some basis for better conjecture may be provided when Mr. Kissinger makes good on his promise to lay the record bare once the crisis is safely past. In the meantime, it ought to be enough for now to know that whatever grave threat existed over the past 24 hours has apparently been removed by Soviet agreement yesterday afternoon to a United Nations resolution establishing the sort of Mideast peace-keeping force—without great power representation—which the United States had favored all along. But this almost certainly won't be considered enough, either by the President and his supporters, or his critics, again judging from Mr. Kissinger's televised press conference. For inevitably our own internal crisis of government intruded and the hard, uncomfortable questions were asked.

Thus:

Q. . . . is it possible that the (Soviet Union) saw the events of last weekend as having so weakened the President, who is threatened with impeachment, that they saw a target of opportunity?

Mr. Kissinger: Speculations about motives are always dangerous. But one cannot have crises of authority in a society for a period of months without paying a price somewhere along the line.

And again:

Q. It seems to me that you are asking the American people . . . who are already badly shaken by the events of the past week to accept a very traumatic military alert involving nuclear forces on the basis of a kind of handful of smoke without telling them exactly why . . . I wonder if you can give us any more information that will help convince people that there's some solid basis for the action that has been taken?

Mr. Kissinger: We are attempting to preserve the peace in very difficult circumstances. It is up to you ladies and gentlemen to determine whether this is the moment you try to create a crisis of confidence in the field of foreign policy as well . . . there has to be a minimum of confidence that the senior officials of the American government are not playing with the lives of the American people."

Now, there are a number of things to be said about these exchanges, and the first is that Mr. Kissinger is right on several counts: in the absence of the evidence, speculation about motives is not only dangerous but fruitless—whether we are talking about the motives of the Russians or of the President. It is entirely conceivable that the Soviets *did* try to exploit Mr. Nixon's domestic difficulties, on the theory that his weakened political condition would make it harder for him to respond forcefully; and it is entirely possible that, suspecting this, the President felt a need to react more vigorously than he otherwise might have. But this is not the same thing as saying that he lacked solid evidence for his suspicions about Russian intentions, for if there had in fact been no Soviet threat, the trumping up of false evidence of one could hardly provide lasting relief from the threat of impeachment he now confronts at home. Nor could Mr. Kissinger be realistically expected to produce the evidence. We would add that the Secretary's disinclination to be specific about the nature of the Soviet acts should not be received as *prima facie* evidence that he had nothing to impart: it would have served no useful purpose for Mr. Kissinger to place before the world detailed accounts of suspicions and of provocative Soviet activities which the Russians, if they wished to back away, would then have had somehow to disavow. In short, in an episode of this sort, it is fair to say, that a "minimum of confidence" is required.

But it is at this point that we come to the nub of the matter. For Secretary Kissinger is both right and wrong in what he has to say about public confidence. He is right in thinking that "one cannot have crises of authority in a society for a period of months without paying a price somewhere along the line." And he would be right, in our view, in measuring the price very largely in terms of public trust in the President. But he and others in the administration, including the President, have got it all wrong if they truly believe that this crisis of confidence in the government was created by the "ladies and gentlemen" of the press—or that it is something that can be conveniently suspended in the name of national "security." For our crisis at home was created by the President. And it grows out of a collapse of public confidence in Mr. Nixon's respect for public institutions and rules of public procedure which are, in a very real way, as fundamental to the nation's security as the conduct of the nation's foreign policy.