



ON ALERT: TRUCKS & TROOPS AT FORT BRAGG, N.C.; PLANES AT ELLINGTON AIR FORCE BASE, TEXAS

Was the Alert Scare Necessary?

No sooner had Richard Nixon put 2,000,000 U.S. servicemen round the world on stand-by alert than many Americans were asking whether the war scare was really necessary. Undoubtedly, most previous Presidents would have received wholehearted public backing, at least initially; as Secretary of State Henry Kissinger said, it was a symptom of the times that Nixon did not. Instead, the suspicion arose that the President had overreacted to Soviet tough talk, either because his Watergate woes had impaired his judgment or because he wanted to divert public attention from them with a show of brinkmanship.

Without releasing much solid evidence, the Administration tried to squelch such notions, insisting that the Soviets had been on the verge of sending troops to the Middle East. Defense Secretary James Schlesinger reported that U.S. officials had been watching Soviet moves with increasing misgivings. The Russians had built up their naval forces in the Mediterranean from 60 to 85 ships since the war began, put about 50,000 airborne troops on "comprehensive alert," and mobilized two mechanized divisions near the Black Sea. They then abruptly ended their supply flights to Egypt, leading U.S. analysts to fear that the transports had been called home to be used to move Soviet troops into the Middle East.

More directly, Soviet Party Chief Leonid Brezhnev had sent Nixon a note that was described as "brutal" by Senator Henry ("Scoop") Jackson of Washington and by the President as a message that "left very little to the imagination as to what he intended."

The note was kept secret, but TIME has learned that, instead of beginning in the usual diplomatic salutation "Dear Mr. President," it started out with a harsher "Mr. Nixon." It also threatened the "destruction of the state of Israel" by Soviet forces if Israel did not stop violating the cease-fire (see THE WORLD). One member of the Johnson Administration recalled that the Russians made similarly harsh threats toward the end of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war; Johnson correctly decided that they never intended to act and ignored them.

The discrepancy in the accounts as to when the alert was signaled added to the doubts. Secretary Kissinger said that it came at 3 a.m.; the Pentagon claimed that the time was more like midnight. The sequence gave rise to suspicions among some that Nixon might have decided on the alert, then presented it to the council to be ratified.*

Even Schlesinger's evidence of Soviet military preparations left some intelligence experts unconvinced. They described it as "flimsy," "inconclusive" and "not materially different from what was going on throughout the crisis." For example, they said that the Soviet airborne units had been on and off alert ever since the end of the war's first week and that they had always had their own aircraft for transport.

The puzzle of Kissinger's somber

*Last week's alert was what the Pentagon calls "Defcon 3" for Defense Condition Three, in which troops report to barracks for possible movement and stand by for action. Under Defcon 2 they would proceed to staging areas. In Defcon 1 they would be deployed and engaged.

press conference also remained. He described the U.S.-Russian confrontation as one that could still go either way. Yet Nixon in his press conference left the impression that he and Brezhnev had resolved the crisis during the night before Kissinger's appearance. In fact, soon after Kissinger had finished outlining the reasons for the U.S. alert, the Soviets approved a Security Council resolution for a U.N. force to police the cease-fire. Thus, Kissinger could be accused of being unduly alarmist in his televised appearance, if indeed he knew by then that the Russians had agreed to back down.

A final complexity was added when Brezhnev intimated in a Moscow speech that the Administration had been spreading "fantastic rumors." Brezhnev's suggestion does not settle the matter, of course; Americans are not yet ready to accept the word of a Russian leader over an American President, no matter how much credibility Nixon has lost. It is very difficult for anyone without direct knowledge and responsibility in a crisis to judge those charged with the national defense.

But the question that can properly be asked is whether a worldwide alert, with all the inevitable anxieties that attended it, was necessary. In view of the Brezhnev letter, obviously some response seemed called for. While Lyndon Johnson got away with calling the Soviet bluff, Nixon might not have. And Nixon's policy did work, in the sense that the Russians did not send troops to the Middle East. That pragmatic measure does not, however, rule out the possibility that perhaps some less dramatic action might have ended the crisis, particularly if Brezhnev and Nixon understand each other as well as the President insists they do.

tive Branch. If the President would not cooperate with him, impeachment should be considered.

Nixon watched the Washington Redskins defeat the St. Louis Cardinals on television and telephoned his congratulations to Coach George Allen. If he had listened closely, Nixon could have heard automobile horns honking outside the White House in response to the signs of protesters: HONK FOR IMPEACHMENT.

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The outcry grew louder. Standing, shouting and cheering, some 1,600 representatives to the AFL-CIO convention in Miami Beach unanimously approved a resolution calling upon Nixon to resign and urging the House to impeach him "forthwith" if he did not. Democratic Senator Daniel Inouye, a member of the Senate Watergate committee, told the convention: "Like many of you, I have sadly concluded that President

Nixon can no longer effectively lead our country." He said that the President should resign.

Returning to Capitol Hill despite the holiday, key Democratic House leaders huddled with Speaker Carl Albert, currently the presidential successor. Among the strategists were John McFall, the Democratic whip, and Judiciary Chairman Rodino. The floor leader, Thomas P. ("Tip") O'Neill, was consulted at his home in Massachusetts. All were aware