

Behind Ford's Mideast threat

ANALYSIS

By James McCartney
Knight News Service

WASHINGTON — By speaking in deliberately ambiguous terms about the possibility of U.S. military involvement in the Middle East, President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger have left the world confused.

Are they serious about it, or not?

Enough has been said now, both publicly and privately by high administration officials, that it can be reported authoritatively what the administration is trying to do, and why.

The administration is, indeed, threatening U.S. military intervention — attempting to deliver what one high official called “a message” to the oil producers.

The “message” is supposed to be that the U.S. will consider military intervention in the event of a new, all-out oil embargo against the entire industrialized world — not only the U.S. but Europe and Japan as well.

This would be a far more serious embargo than the much-publicized one that grew out of the 1973 Yom Kippur war. That embargo was only against the U.S. and the Netherlands.

The threats are a result of Kissinger's fear that the Arab oil producers may have gotten heady with power as a result of the relative success of the earlier embargo.

Kissinger has feared that the producers might conclude that there is no limit on leverage they could apply to the industrialized world.

He wanted to draw a line, to make limits.

In particular, he did not want the Arab oil producers to believe that they could force a change in U.S. policy toward Israel by the use of all-out economic pressure against Europe and Japan — a “strangling” oil embargo.

The U.S. cannot be brought to its knees by an embargo like the last one.

Such an embargo is a harassment, a nuisance, a monumental inconvenience. It leads to long lines at the gas stations and general disruption. But the U.S. still produces about two thirds of its oil requirements and can get by if it has to.

It is a different story with Europe and Japan, however.

The Europeans depend on imports for about 90 percent of their oil, the Japanese even more.

Administration officials say that an embargo against Europe and Japan, as well as the U.S. — would undoubtedly, lead to economic “strangulation.”

“It would bring industries to a halt, stop auto travel cold.

“It would totally disrupt these countries,” said one official.

The message that Kissinger and Ford have been trying to communicate is that the U.S. will not abandon Europe and Japan.

They are already reeling from the impact of skyrocketing oil prices.

Kissinger fears not only the economic impact, but also the possible political ramifications—the threat of Communist or fascist takeovers.

The U.S. threat has been bolstered by efforts to obtain airfield facilities on Masira Island near the mouth of the Persian Gulf.

That move by the U.S. can also be considered part of the psychological game against the Arabs.

There has also been a report—in the liberal “New Republic” magazine—that the U.S. Army is cranking up a three-division Middle East expeditionary force.”

Asked about this on a national television Thursday night President Ford said he couldn't talk about “military contingency plans.” It was the kind of response that could do little but encourage speculation.

Friday, White House press secretary Ron Nessen said there was “no truth” to the New Republic report.

Nessen may convince many in the U.S. but it is doubtful the Arabs will be convinced, in the light of the President's own equivocal statement.

None of this means that the U.S. is going to invade the oil countries, or that there is a serious chance now of a U.S. invasion.

But if a total oil embargo is imposed on the industrial world the Ford Administration clearly intends to take another look.

And Kissinger and Ford want the Arabs to know that.