

By Lyndon B. Johnson: Crisis

The Hot Line Played Active Role As U.S. and Soviet Sought Peace

INSTALLMENT VII

Following is the seventh of 11 installments of excerpts from Lyndon Baines Johnson's memoirs of his Presidential years, which will be published by Holt, Rinehart & Winston on Nov. 1 under the title "The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969":

JUST before 8 o'clock on the morning of June 5, 1967, the telephone rang in my bedroom at the White House. Bob McNamara was calling with a message never heard before by an American President. "Mr. President," he said, "the hot line is up."

The hot line is a special Teletype circuit linking Moscow and Washington. The technicians call it Molink. Its purpose is to provide instant communication between the Soviet leaders and the American President in times of grave crises in order to minimize the dangers of delay and misunderstanding. The hot line was installed on Aug. 30, 1963, but had been operated only to test its effectiveness and to exchange New Year's greetings. It had never been used for its intended purpose until now.

McNamara's words were ominous, given the background against which they were spoken. Three and one-half hours before, at 4:35 A.M., Walt Rostow had awakened me with the news that war had erupted in the Middle East. I had been fearing a Middle East conflict and working as hard as I could to forestall it. Trouble in that area was, in my judgment, potentially far more dangerous than the war in Southeast Asia.

From the founding of Israel in 1948 we had supported the territorial integrity of all the states in that region. Our commitment was rooted in the tripartite declaration of 1950, in which the United States, Great Britain and France promised to oppose any effort to alter by force the national borders in the Middle East.

I believe we had been fair over the years in Middle East matters. We acted in 1958 to preserve the territorial integrity of Jordan and Lebanon. Other Arab nations benefited from our protective influence throughout this period. But in the nineteen-sixties it was Israel whose territory was threatened by hostile neighbors.

In an effort to gain influence in the radical Arab states, the Soviet Union shifted in the mid-nineteen-fifties from its original support of Israel to an at-

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tempt to push moderate Arab states toward a more radical course and to provide a Middle East base for expanding its role in the Mediterranean, in Africa and in the areas bordering on the Indian Ocean. The Soviets used Arab hostility toward Israel to inflame Arab politics to the boiling point. Country after country had shifted to the Russian view. The expanding Soviet presence in this strategic region threatened our position in Europe.

The danger implicit in every border incident in the Middle East was not merely war between Israelis and Arabs but an ultimate confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States and its NATO allies. This was the danger that concerned me, as well as the tragedy of war itself.

The backdrop to the war that began that day was crowded with the diplomatic maneuvering, pent-up tensions and explosions of the past 20 years. The most important events, stripped to bare essentials, were these: War had erupted between Israel and the Arabs twice before, in 1948 and 1956. Both times Israeli military forces showed remarkable strength and ability. Both times hostilities ended because of pressures brought to bear in the United Nations, but there was no permanent settlement. In the 1956 war Israeli troops overran the Sinai Peninsula. They agreed to withdraw from the area for two reasons: first, a U.N. decision to put in a peacekeeping force to patrol the borders between Israel and Egypt, and second, President Eisenhower's assurance that the Gulf of Aqaba, Israel's only outlet to the Indian Ocean, would remain open as an international waterway. To symbolize this assurance, the United Nations sent forces to Sharm el Sheik.

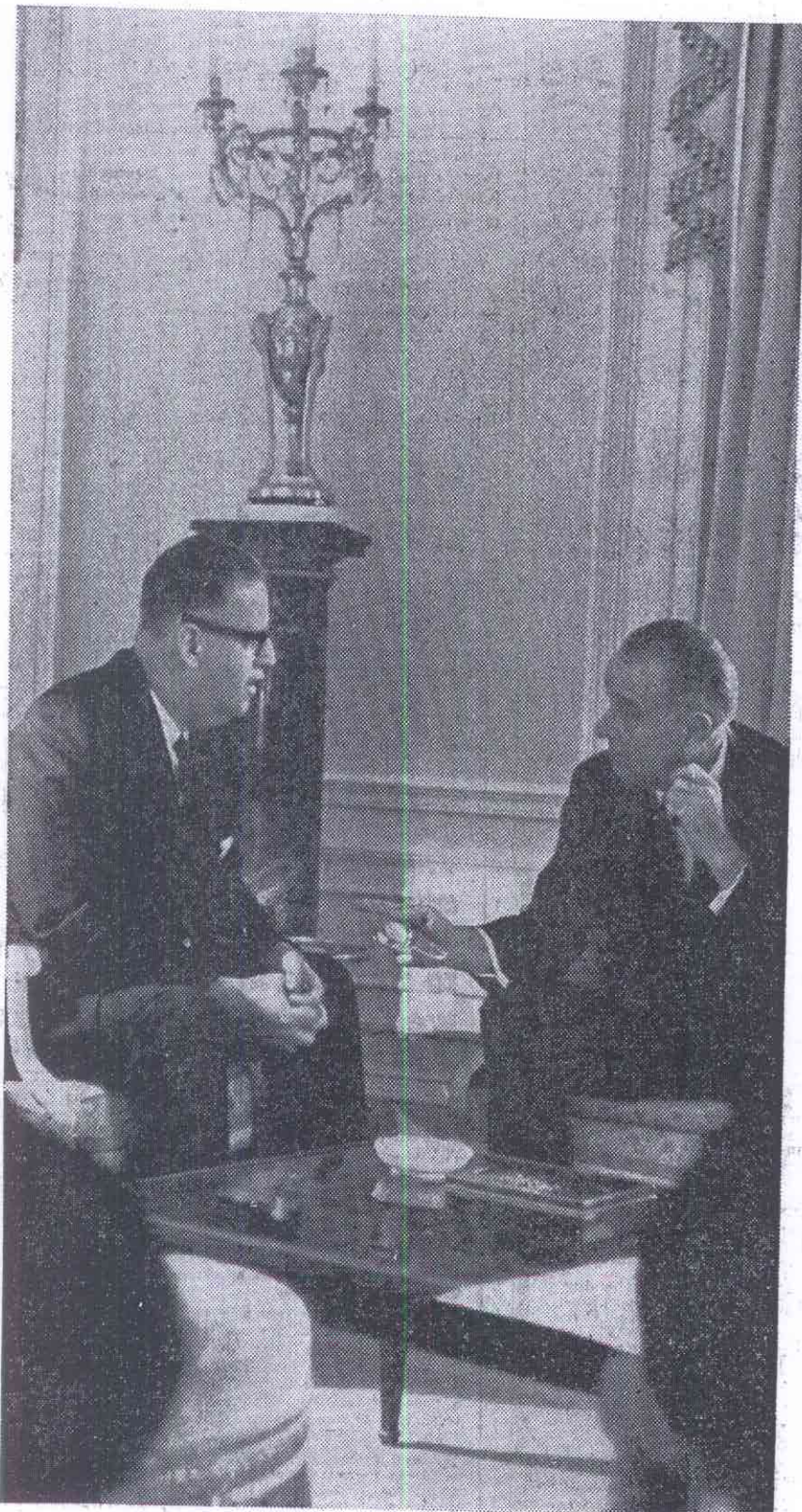
An uneasy truce between the warring states prevailed until 1965. The next year a new radical government in Syria increased terrorist raids against Israel, sending Arab guerrillas across the borders of Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. As the raids increased in intensity, Israeli forces retaliated.

Retaliation had little effect. Syria and Egypt concluded a mutual defense agreement. Terrorist raids continued and tension increased into the spring of 1967. On May 12 of that year Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol warned that more terrorism would bring further retaliatory action. Reports spread in Damascus that the Israelis were mobilizing major forces on the Syrian frontier for full-scale action. We investigated, found the reports to be untrue and informed the Russians and the nations bordering on Israel of this fact. U.N. Secretary General U Thant spoke publicly to the same effect.

IN mid-May a theme of Soviet propaganda was that Israel was about to attack Syria, "incited by American imperialist circles and foreign monopolies." Our reports indicated that the purpose of these rumors was to pressure Egypt into military support of Syria. The reports were confirmed later in statements made by President Gamal Abdel Nasser.

On May 14, 1967, Nasser mobilized his armed forces. Two days later Egypt asked the United Nations to withdraw its peacekeeping force in the Sinai. In an action that shocked me then, and that still puzzles me, Secretary General U Thant announced that U.N. forces could not remain in the Sinai without Egyptian approval. Even the Egyptians were surprised. Nasser's Ambassador in Washington, Dr. Mostafa Kamel, told us that his Government thought and hoped that U Thant would play for time. But he did not, and tension increased.

On May 18 U.N. forces withdrew. Egyptian troops entered the Sinai Peninsula and took up positions on Israel's borders. Despite his ill-conceived first maneuver, U Thant then announced that he was going to Cairo to try to pre-

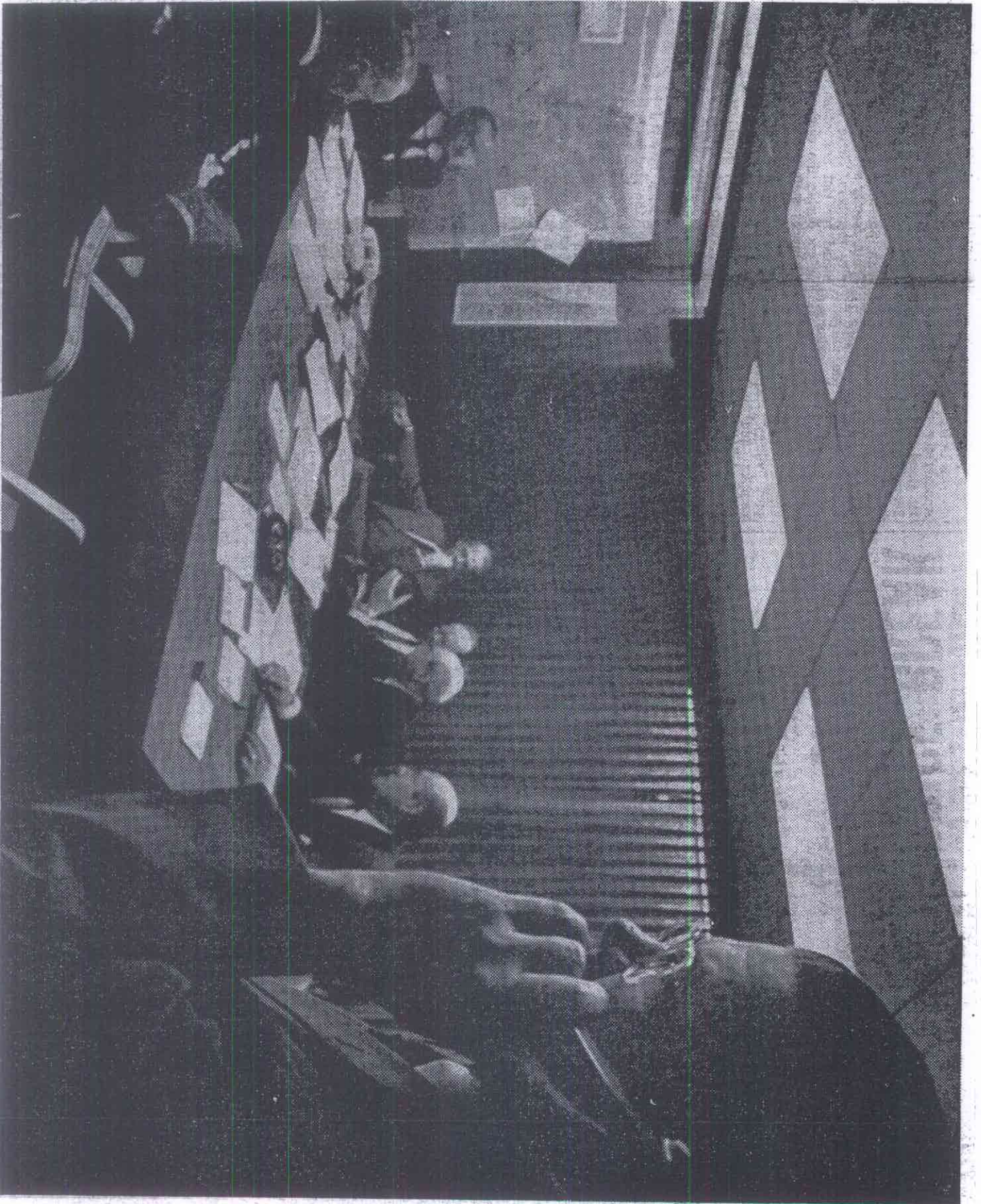


On May 26, Abba Eban, Israeli Foreign Minister, warned of trouble

Y. R. Okamoto

President Johnson with advisers in situation room of the White House during war between Israel and Egypt in June, 1967. After a hotline call from Premier Kosygin, Robert S. McNamara, Defense Secretary, ordered the Sixth Fleet to move in 50 miles closer to the Syrian coast.

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serve peace. We fully supported his effort. As far as possible, I wanted the main thrust of our diplomacy to be through the United Nations. At the same time I was prepared to use American influence in any way that might be effective and helpful. On May 22 I sent a message to Soviet Chairman Kosygin suggesting a joint effort to calm the situation.

That same day, while U Thant was flying to Cairo, the Egyptian Government made its fateful announcement: Egypt was closing the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping. Although we cannot be sure, it seems likely that Nasser took this mortally dangerous action independently of the Soviet Union.

I knew that on Feb. 26, 1957, Secretary of State Dulles had informed President Eisenhower in a memorandum "that Israel has been assured that a purpose of the United Nations Emergency Force would be to restrain the exercise of belligerent rights which would prevent passage through the Strait of Tiran." I wanted to know precisely how Eisenhower had viewed the matter at that time, so I sought his views and invited any statement he might care to make. General Eisenhower sent me a message stating his view that the Israelis' right of access to the Gulf of Aqaba was definitely part of the "commitment" we had made to them. In a statement on May 23 I charged that Nasser's blockade was "illegal" and "potentially disastrous to the cause of peace."

When the U.N. forces withdrew from the Sinai, I instructed Rusk to find out how France and Great Britain viewed the pledge they had made under the 1950 tripartite declaration.

Our Ambassador to France, Charles (Chip) Bohlen, talked with officials in Paris and reported that the French believed it would be a mistake to invoke the tripartite declaration.

The British, on the other hand, were actively seeking a way out of the crisis in full cooperation with us. On May 24 their Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, George Thomson, met with Rusk and other State Department officials in Washington to discuss a proposal based on the commitments of the international community made in 1957 at the United Nations. The British proposed two steps. First, there would be a public declaration, signed by as many nations as possible, reasserting the right of free passage through the Gulf of Aqaba. There was hope that the declaration might even be endorsed by the United Nations. Second, a naval task force would be set up, composed of as many nations as possible, to break Nasser's blockade and open the Strait of Tiran.

During the evening of May 26 I met with Israel's Foreign Minister, Abba Eban, who had just flown to Washington. Our conversation was direct and frank. Eban said that according to Israeli intelligence the United Arab Republic was preparing an all-out attack. I asked Secretary McNamara, who was present, to give Mr. Eban a summary of our findings. Three separate intelligence groups had looked carefully into the matter, McNamara said, and it was our best judgment that a U.A.R. attack was not imminent.

Eban asked what the United States was willing to do to keep the Gulf of Aqaba open. I reminded him that I had defined our position on May 23. We were hard at work on what to do to assure free access, and when to do it. I told him that I saw some hope in the plan for an international naval force in the strait area, but that before such a proposal could be effective I had to be sure Congress was on board.

On May 30 Prime Minister Eshkol sent me a message confirming that Eban's conversation with me had had "an important influence on our decision to await developments for a further limited period." He went on to say: "It is crucial that the international naval escort should move through the strait within a week or two."

As my advisers and I interpreted it, the phrase "within a week or two" meant that we had about two weeks to make diplomacy succeed before Israel took independent military action.

Besides Great Britain and the United States, two other nations had agreed to take part in a naval task force—known informally as the Red Sea regatta—if events proved this necessary. The Dutch had expressed their inten-

tion to us in writing. Harold Holt, Prime Minister of Australia, assured me personally in a visit to Washington on June 1 that his country would assign two of its fastest cruisers to the joint task force. We will never know how successful that "regatta" might have been. But I am convinced that Congress as well as the President would have honored President Eisenhower's 1957 commitment on Aqaba when it was clear that every alternative had been exhausted and that other nations, even a few others, would have gone with us.

I HAVE always had a deep feeling of sympathy for Israel and its people, gallantly building and defending a modern nation against great odds and against the tragic background of Jewish experience. I can understand that men might decide to act on their own when hostile forces gather on their frontiers and cut off a major port, and when antagonistic political leaders fill the air with threats to destroy their nation. Nonetheless, I have never concealed my regret that Israel decided to move when it did. I always made it equally clear, however, to the Russians and to every other nation, that I did not accept the oversimplified charge of Israeli aggression. Arab actions in the weeks before the war started—forcing U.N. troops out, closing the port of Aqaba and assembling forces on the Israeli border—made that charge ridiculous.

When I was first called early on the morning of June 5 with news that war had broken out, the available information was sketchy. The only clear fact was that Israeli and Egyptian forces were fighting. Each side had accused

the other of aggression. Whatever the truth proved to be I knew that tragic consequences could follow. By 7 A.M. the facts were beginning to come into focus. The Israelis had attacked Egypt's major airfields, and with measurable effect.

McNamara's call brought the news that the hot line was activated. I later learned that when McNamara heard Moscow was calling on the hot line, he instructed his communications people to pipe it into the White House. To his amazement, they advised him that it could not be done—that the hot line ended at the Pentagon. McNamara said sharply that with all the money we had invested in military communications there must be some way to send Moscow's message directly to the White House situation room and they had better figure it out. They quickly found a way.

I was informed that Chairman Kosygin was at the Kremlin end. He had agreed to wait until I was on hand before sending his message. I went quickly to the situation room, joining Rusk, McNamara and Rostow. Kosygin's message began to arrive in a matter of minutes.

It expressed Soviet concern over the fighting. Kosygin said that the Russians intended to work for a cease-fire and that they hoped we would exert influence on Israel. I replied, in part, that we would use all our influence to bring hostilities to an end and that we were pleased the Soviets planned to do the same.

We set about immediately to find a way to resolve the explosive issue in the United Nations.

The next day also began with activation of the hot line. I went to the situation room at 6:40 A.M. Already assembled there were the Vice President, Secretaries Rusk and McNamara, Nicholas Katzenbach, Walt Rostow, McGeorge Bundy, Clark Clifford (then chairman of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board) and Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson, who had come from Moscow for consultation.

I spent many hours in the situation

room throughout the Middle East crisis. During some very trying days the room served as headquarters for the U.S. Government. On this particular occasion, as we sat around the conference table at dawn, Lady Bird brought breakfast to us. She had followed me from the Executive Mansion, helped prepare the food for us in the White House staff mess and aided the stewards in serving it. Over scrambled eggs, in the crisis center of America, we reviewed the message from Moscow. The Soviets felt the Security Council should press for a cease-fire.

Meanwhile, Cairo had falsely charged that U.S. carrier-based planes had taken part in attacks on Egypt. On the basis of this accusation, Egypt, Algeria, Syria,

Iraq, the Sudan and Yemen broke diplomatic relations with the United States. Rusk left the situation room and went to the West Lobby of the White House, where the reporters were assembled, to label the charge a lie. I mentioned the false Arab allegation in my answer to Kosygin over the hot line. I told him that since his intelligence knew where our carriers and planes were, I hoped he would emphasize the facts to Cairo.

As Israeli forces moved forward steadily into Jordan and the Sinai Desert, the Russian delegation in the United Nations decided to accept a simple cease-fire resolution. As the "first step" toward peace the Security Council adopted that resolution, and an appeal to stop the fighting went to Israel and the Arab states.

June 7, the third day of the war, began with the Israelis announcing that they were willing to accept a cease-fire provided the Arabs agreed. But the Arab states did not respond. Before the day ended, the good news arrived that a cease-fire was in effect between the armies of Jordan and Israel.

June 8 began on a note of tragedy. A morning news bulletin reported that a U.S. Navy communications ship, the Liberty, had been torpedoed in international waters off the Sinai coast. For 70 tense minutes we had no idea who was responsible, but at 11 o'clock we learned that the ship had been attacked in error by Israeli gunboats and planes. Ten men of the Liberty crew were killed and a hundred were wounded. This heartbreaking episode grieved the Israelis deeply, as it did us. There was a possibility that the incident might lead to even greater misfortune, and it was precisely to avoid further confusion and tragedy that I sent a message to Chairman Kosygin on the hot line. I told him exactly what had happened and advised him that carrier aircraft were on their way to the scene to investigate. I wanted him to know, I said, that investigation was the sole purpose of these flights, and I hoped he would inform the proper parties. Kosygin replied that our message had been received and the information had been relayed immediately to the Egyptians.

Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson reported, after his return to Moscow, that this particular exchange had made a deep impression on the Russians. Use of the hot line of this purpose, to prevent misunderstanding, was exactly what both parties had envisioned.

On the afternoon of June 8 the U.N. Secretary General announced, at last, that the U.A.R. had accepted the cease-fire. Only the question of Syria remained, but that proved difficult and even dangerous. The Soviet Union was obviously extremely sensitive about Syria, which it appeared to regard as a rather special protégé. We suspected that in addition to large shipments of Soviet military equipment being sent

to Syria, substantial numbers of Soviet advisers were present in the country. We did know Israel's military intentions toward Syria, and the situation remained tense on June 9. A cease-fire had been announced, but each side accused the other of violations. Fighting

erupted in Syria, where Israeli forces proceeded to clear the Golan heights. There were rumors of Israeli raids on Damascus.

We used every diplomatic resource to convince Israel to work out an effective cease-fire with Syria. Finally, at 3 A.M. on June 10, we received assurance that the Israelis would implement the cease-fire resolution.

ON the morning of June 10 we thought we could see the end of the road. But new word from Moscow brought a sudden chill to the situation. I was told that the hot line was active again.

The Soviets accused Israel of ignoring all Security Council resolutions for a cease-fire. Kosygin said a "very crucial moment" had now arrived. He spoke of the possibility of "independent decision" by Moscow. He foresaw the risk of a "grave catastrophe" and stated that unless Israel unconditionally halted operations within the next few hours, the Soviet Union would take "necessary actions, including military." Thompson, at Rusk's request, read the original Russian text to make certain that the word "military" was indeed the correct translation. Thompson said it was. In an exchange between heads of government, these were serious words: "very crucial moment," "catastrophe," "independent decision," "military actions."

The room was deathly still as we carefully studied this grave communication. I turned to McNamara. "Where is the Sixth Fleet now?" I asked him. I knew our ships were circling somewhere in the Mediterranean but I wanted to know the exact location.

McNamara picked up the phone and spoke into it. Then, cradling the phone, he said to me: "It is approximately 300 miles west of the Syrian coast."

"How fast do these carriers normally travel?" I asked.

"About 25 knots. Traveling normally, they are some 10 to 12 hours away from the Syrian coast," McNamara said.

We knew that Soviet intelligence ships were electronically monitoring the fleet's every movement. Any change in course or speed would be signaled instantly to Moscow. There are times when the wisdom and rightness of a President's judgment are critically important. We were at such a moment. The Soviets had made a decision. I had to respond.

The fleet was under orders to stay at least 100 miles from the Syrian coast in its cruising pattern. I told McNamara to issue orders at once to change the course and cut the restriction to 50 miles. The Secretary of Defense gave the orders over the phone. No one else said a word.

We all knew the Russians would get the message as soon as their monitors observed the change in the fleet's pattern. That message, which no translator would need to interpret to the Kremlin leadership, was that the United States was prepared to resist Soviet intrusion in the Middle East. But I had to reply directly to Chairman Kosygin. I knew my message must be temperate and factual. As we understood the situation, the Norwegian U.N. negotiator, Gen. Odd Bull, was very close to completing a cease-fire agreement between Syria and Israel. I told Kosygin this was where we thought things stood and that we had been pressing Israel to make the cease-fire completely effective and had received assurances that this would be done.

Throughout the morning I had additional exchanges with the Chairman over the hot line. Kosygin's messages later in the morning became more temperate. Israel and Syria moved to a cease-fire.

From the book "The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969," by Lyndon Baines Johnson, to be published by Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc. © 1971 HEC Public Affairs Foundation.

Tomorrow: The making of Vietnam policy, 1967-68