

Leaders Rally to President

Bipartisan Support Voiced on Warning to Moscow

By Spencer Rich

Washington Post Staff Writer

Congressional leaders rallied yesterday behind the President's effort to bar Soviet troops from the Middle East, despite some Capitol Hill suspicions that the White House exaggerated the crisis to divert attention from its Watergate problems.

"I'm delighted," said Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott (R-Pa.) after learning that the U.S.-backed resolution had won U.N. Security Council approval.

Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), in a statement from Brussels, said "I give my full support to President Nixon and Dr. Kissinger in this new crisis over the Middle East. It would be tragic if a great power like the Soviet Union has so seriously misjudged the United States and our political system that it would seek an unconscionable advantage for itself in the Middle East, at the expense of Israel and the U.S. and the cause of peace."

Kennedy's allusion to Soviet misjudgment of the U.S. political system, like similar references in statements from several other members of Congress, was a warning to the Soviet Union that it should not attempt risky foreign policy adventures in the belief that the United States is so crippled by the Watergate disputes and the forced resignation of the Vice President that it will be unable to respond.

Sen. Edmund S. Muskie (D-Maine) said, "In the circumstances outlined by Secretary Kissinger at noon today, I wish to make clear that the American government stands undivided in its efforts to bring a just peace to the Middle East. No one should misinterpret the domestic strains of our democratic system as offering an opportunity for foreign ad-

venture at our expense or the expense of world peace."

Sens. Clifford P. Case (R-N.J.) and Charles H. Percy (R-Ill.) — like Kennedy and Muskie frequent critics of the President on many matters — also issued statements of strong backing for Mr. Nixon's moves in the Middle East.

"From Secretary Kissinger's press conference and my own observation," said Case, "I believe that our course has been right and that our present position is sound. As to the military alert, I am satisfied that it is, as the secretary said, a purely precautionary and prudent measure in the circumstances."

Percy said, "If the Soviet Union feels that the U.S. is so preoccupied with its domestic concerns that it cannot devote its full attention to preserving the peace and protecting its vital interests, he Soviet leaders will be making a gross miscalculation and would be well advised to take no unilateral action." The President's Mideast policies, he said, are "right."

Rep. Rep Clarence Long (D-Md.), said, "As ranking member of the Foreign Operations Subcommittee of Appropriations, I would be in favor of providing economic and logistical aid to a U.N. peacekeeping force manned by the smaller countries, that is, countries not permanent members of the Security Council and in any case excluding the U. S. and the Soviet Union."

Sen. Bill Brock (R-Tenn.) asserted, "I deeply hope our domestic difficulties have not caused Russian leaders to misjudge American's character or our united resolve to stand as one nation in the face of external threat . . . Let the Soviet Union not underestimate our commitment to the sovereignty of Israel and to

peace in the Middle East . . . The President has my support."

Despite the strong backing for the President much of it tendered before the U.N. vote accepting the U. S. position — there was an undercurrent of suspicion that the President might have escalated the crisis in order to assume a heroic stance and take people's minds off his domestic problems.

The suspicion, voiced privately early in the day by a number of senators and House members and by cautious senior staff members, admittedly didn't reflect any detailed knowledge of the actual Mideast situation as it was developing yesterday.

Rather, it reflected the low state of the President's prestige on Capitol Hill on account of the Watergate scandal, the resignation of Vice President Agnew, the firing of Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox, charges that excessive federal money has been spent on presidential homes, and questions about election campaign financing.

"Do you think he did it to push Watergate off the front page?" one Democratic senator wondered in a private conversation, referring to the President's troop alert.

Reps. John E. Moss (D-Calif.) and Robert L. Leggett (D-Calif.) both openly voiced the same suspicion, according to wire service reports. "It is quite possible" the troop alert was designed to divert the nation's attention from Watergate, Leggett said, according to United Press International.

Moss, according to the UPI report, said, "It appears to me that this is an effort to divert attention from the more damaging disclosures the President feared Archi-

bald Cox was about to make when he fired him as special prosecutor."

Several senators made the same point in private.

When the suspicions about the President's motives were cited by a reporter at Kissinger's news conference, Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.) was outraged.

Goldwater called these voicing the suspicions "hounds of destruction," and labeled them "irresponsible men and women dedicated to overthrowing our form of government who have no regard for the terrific load that the office of the President carries in relation to foreign policy."

House Speaker Carl Albert (D-Okla.) and Majority Leader Thomas P. O'Neill (D-Mass.), mindful of the speculation that the troop alert had a domestic political purpose, went out of their way to contradict such assertions in public statements.

The Soviet threat to send troops unilaterally to police a Mideast cease-fire raised a disturbing specter for Congress — the possibility that U.S. troops might be sent also. There is overwhelming support for a U.S. policy of sending arms to Israel to counteract Moscow shipments to Arab nations. But few members of Congress would like to see U.S. troops go there, only months after final withdrawal from Vietnam.

The 1957 Mideast Resolution, authorizing direct U.S. military intervention in the Mideast to combat Communist moves, is still on the books, but many members believe it was passed so long ago that it couldn't validly be used as a basis for action by the President unless he came back to Congress for reenactment first.