



Behind the Big Russian Gamble

— Joseph Alsop

IF NIXON hadn't put part of SAC in the air and ordered the rest of the U.S. military alert, you would have seen Soviet airborne divisions in the air, en route to Egypt and maybe Sinai, before noon that same day."

This cheery summary by one of the wiser men of the government ought to suggest that we have not properly appreciated the extreme gravity of last week's Mideastern crisis. The more that is learned of the background, the more the same lesson emerges. The first part of the lesson concerns the Soviets' real aim in sponsoring the Arab attack on Israel.

Suppose the Arab attack had succeeded. The Soviets would then have had the glorious aura, for all Arabs, of the ultimate revenge-givers. The Suez Canal would also have been opened for them, permitting them to pour powerful naval armaments into the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf.

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WITH ALL THIS increase of glory and especially of power, the Soviets would also have been in a wholly new position with the historically anti-Communist "oil Arabs" of the Arabian peninsula and the Persian gulf. Both areas are in fact ideally suited to gunboat diplomacy.

The stakes in the gamble, then, were remarkably high. The evidence is rather clear, however, that the Soviet government approached this enormous gamble with the same division of counsel that led to the long backing and filling before the brutal invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Thus, one must assume that the risk-takers were responsible for the seven So-

viet airborne divisions west of the Urals entering the first stage of alert. This was at the very beginning of the war, when the Arabs were doing extremely well. It looked as though the Arabs were also going to get some important Soviet help. And, as revealed in this space at that time, an ultra-stern message therefore went from President Nixon to General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev.

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AFTER THIS message, since the Arabs were still doing well, the prudent men in the Kremlin no doubt insisted on leaving well enough alone. Then, however, the Arabs began to do very badly. And the prudent men there insisted on Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger being called to Moscow for the meeting that produced the U.N. resolution on a cease-fire in place.

Even following that meeting, however, the Egyptian situation deteriorated rapidly. Hence, the Kremlin's risk-takers reasserted themselves. Pretty certainly, the risk-takers only won the day on the argument, "well, let's see how the Americans react: if worse comes to worst, we can always pull back." Lenin's dictum about probing for soft spots with bayonets is relevant here.

Senator J. William Fulbright (Dem-Ark.) now says that the whole thing was a false alarm, no doubt after consulting one of his favorite counselors, Ambassador Dobrynin. But, one supposes even Senator Fulbright does not think that Soviets in Egypt and the Sinai would have limited themselves to "peace-keeping."