



Kennedy and Cuba, Nixon and Mideast

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THE HOUSE majority leader, Representative T. P. O'Neill, has Cambridge, Mass., as the district he must please; and he has always catered to his violently anti-Nixon academic voters.

It is striking, therefore, that O'Neill has directly compared President Nixon's recent Middle Eastern problem to President Kennedy's breathtaking problem of the Soviet missiles in Cuba. O'Neill, of course, had the advantage of knowing the facts, probably including the contents of Leonid Brezhnev's grim message to President Nixon on the night of October 24.

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O'NEILL'S comparison therefore deserves to be pursued in greater detail. There is one cardinal fault in the comparison. In Cuba, President Kennedy had to force a public climb-down by Nikita Khrushchev. In the present instance, President Nixon only had to persuade Leonid Brezhnev not to carry out a private threat.

Yet the threat was to send Soviet troops to intervene in the Middle Eastern war; and three Soviet airborne divisions were ready on their airfields for an intervention that might have occurred within hours. Here the true comparison begins. President Kennedy had days to work out the Cuban missile crisis. President Nixon had the late evening of October 24, when the Brezhnev note was in his hands, until 3 a.m. October 25, when he ordered the U.S. military alert and sent his answer to Moscow.

Kissinger further stated that the National Security Council's recommenda-

tions to the President were unanimous. This was literally true, but only barely true. It can be stated confidently that a good deal of the unanimity had the approximate consistency of jello. This was a problem President Kennedy also had to face. Yet there was another, far more profound problem that President Kennedy most emphatically did not have to face. At the time of the Cuban missile crisis, the United States had a nuclear-strategic lead over the Soviet Union of at least five to one. Some experts say ten to one. In the Caribbean crisis area, moreover, the United States further enjoyed total supremacy in conventional arms.

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PRESIDENT NIXON, in sharp contrast, well knew that the reinforced Soviet fleet in the Mediterranean was certainly much more modern, was also rather more numerous and was probably more powerful than the U.S. Sixth Fleet. In addition, he well knew that the former vast American nuclear-strategic lead had been frittered away to what is politely called "parity"—and is actually nuclear-strategic inferiority. This was not the President's wish. It was by inheritance from the previous administration and by the obstinate will of a continuously hostile congress.

Finally, it is worth remembering the paeans of praise for the solution of the Cuban missile problem deservedly earned for President Kennedy. Consider, too, the far more difficult time factors and, above all, the fearfully more unfavorable power factors last October 25. It would seem, then, that President Nixon has deserved a lot more praise than he has got.