

Brezhnev Note: 'I Will Say It Straight'

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Soviet Communist Party chief Leonid I. Brezhnev flatly told President Nixon on Oct. 24 that Moscow would "be faced with the necessity urgently to consider the question of taking appropriate steps unilaterally" if the United States refused to join in sending units to enforce the cease-fire in the Middle East.

The letter, which arrived at the White House late during the evening of Oct. 24, led to a worldwide alert of U.S. military forces.

The text of that strongly worded Soviet letter, and a paraphrase of the President's equally clear response became available to The Washington Post yesterday.

Brezhnev's letter, the second from him to arrive that evening, referred

to drastic Israeli violations of the Oct. 22 cease-fire leading to the encirclement of Suez city. The violations, according to the Soviet note, constituted a brazen challenge to both the Soviet Union and the United States. After inviting joint contingents of Soviet-American forces to compel observance of the cease-fire without delay, Brezhnev wrote:

"I will say it straight" that if the United States does not find it possible to act together "with us in this matter, we should be faced with the necessity urgently to consider the question of taking appropriate steps unilaterally."

Brezhnev told Mr. Nixon that Israel could not be permitted to get away with cease-fire violations.

This was the Brezhnev note that Mr. Nixon has said "was very firm and . . .

left very little to the imagination as to what he intended." It was, according to Mr. Nixon "the most difficult crisis we have had since the Cuban confrontation of 1962."

The President made these remarks in his press conference Oct. 26 in defending his action in calling a worldwide alert. Critics of the administration have suggested that he overreacted in order to divert national attention from his deepening Watergate troubles. Six days before, on Oct. 20, Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox was fired and Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson and Deputy Attorney General William D. Ruckelshaus had resigned.

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Mr. Nixon refused, however, to make the exchange of letters with Brezhnev public. Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, who originally said that the record would be made available "upon the conclusion of the present diplomatic efforts," has since also sought to cut off public inquiry into the events that led to the alert.

The alert, according to U.S. officials, was designed to signal the Soviet Union that the United States could not accept unilateral Soviet action and also to heighten U.S. readiness if it became necessary to respond.

There is a continuing debate within the administration, however, as to whether a

worldwide alert including nuclear bombers was necessary or whether it would have been sufficient to alert selected units such as the 82d Airborne. Some officials, while agreeing that the Soviet note contained rough language, said it would have been sufficient to object strongly and do nothing with U.S. forces.

In addition to the signal provided by the alert, Mr. Nixon replied to Brezhnev, saying that the United States could not accept unilateral action by the Soviet Union. In his letter the President reaffirmed the understanding between the United States and the Soviet Union to work for peace in the Middle East but pointed out that this neither included nor warranted the sending of Soviet or American troops to Egypt.

The President also expressed doubt about the validity of Soviet charges that the Israelis were continuing to violate the cease-fire. The Soviet suggestion of unilateral action, he said, was something that must undoubtedly cause great concern and carry consequences that cannot be predicted in advance.

The President urged greater reliance on U.N. observers to supervise the Soviet Union, instead of launching unilateral action, to place compliance with the cease-fire. The United States, he told Brezhnev in conclusion, could not accept unilateral action.

Throughout the crisis the United States had sought to prevent super power intervention in the region, either

separately or jointly. In fact it is believed by some U.S. officials that Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's call on Oct. 16 for a joint Soviet-American force was similarly designed to forestall any unilateral Soviet "assistance."

Soviet officials have cooperated with American officials in refusing to make the entire record public, citing the sanctity of diplomatic communications and the need to preserve detente. But they deny that the Brezhnev note that touched off the U. S. alert was either brutal or threatening or provoking. Soviet officials have characterized the note — before it became available to The Washington Post — as an appeal to reason, an appeal to abide by the understandings reached with Kissinger during his visit to Moscow the weekend of Oct. 20.

Soviet officials said they were puzzled and surprised by the American reaction, which they say was both unexpected and unprovoked. But they admit to a degree of exasperation at signs that the situation in Egypt could have become so desperate that the Soviet Union might have been forced to do something extra if there was no performance on the ba-

sis of the understandings reached.

Nevertheless, they insist that they took no particular military action and say there was no crisis of the magnitude of 1962. Within two days, they note, everything was back on the track.

In addition to the Brezhnev letter, U.S. officials have cited other factors necessitating the alert, including movements of Soviet ships in the Mediterranean about 100 miles off the coast of Egypt, the end of the Soviet airlift (which might have made aircraft available for transporting Soviet airborne troops) and some "diplomatic ambiguities."

But some U.S. officials suggest there was an overreaction and a misreading of the signs growing out of a feeling in the administration of being besieged—partly because of the Watergate scandal—and because of the suspicious nature of both the President and Kissinger.

Others, however, insist the response was commensurate with the threat and that it was clear to the top officials who met the night of Oct. 24-25 that the Brezhnev note was a threat to be reckoned with. They say it was necessary to move quickly because if the

Russians moved unilaterally they would move quickly to prevent an Egyptian defeat.

As for the Israelis, they had no doubt that the U.S. response was required. Foreign Minister Abba Eban said when he was here last week that there was "definite, authentic, real and imminent danger" of Soviet military intervention. He said that "if the response had been any less clear . . . we would have faced the contingency with all it means for the fate of Europe and international peace."

What Eban and the President and Kissinger feared did not occur. Whether the Russians are saying now that they never meant to threaten only because they did not actually send forces cannot be known. And whether it was the U.S. response that deterred Soviet action or whether the Soviet Union never meant to act and were only testing the administration's ability to react while preoccupied by the Watergate scandal are the hypothetical questions of history.

As one U.S. official put it, "Since we don't know what could have happened had we acted differently we can only say what has happened. And what has happened is that the Soviets did not intervene."