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Mr. Nixon's Boycott Prediction

President Nixon's dramatic hint of an early end of the oil boycott, following heavy White House pressure on King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, now threatens to backlash on Mr. Nixon, sour relations with the world's top oil producer and lengthen the boycott.

True, the President's optimistic prediction on Jan. 30 echoed Secretary of State Henry Kissinger on Jan. 22, when he forecast lifting of the boycott before March 4. But in the words of one Arab diplomat: "When Kissinger speaks, that's one thing; when the President speaks, that's something very different."

The background of the President's cheering hint in his State of the Union address, "I can announce tonight that I have been assured" of a meeting of the Arab oil states, is a revealing study of a President desperately and dangerously pressing his luck to find good news for the voters — with highly damaging results.

The key figure backstage was James Akins, Arab-wise U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia. Akins made at least two



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urgent visits to the king's palace in Riyadh. The first followed similar strong urgings by President Anwar Sadat of Egypt. With Israel beginning its withdrawal from the Suez Canal, Sadat almost begged Faisal to throw his considerable weight in the Arab world behind a move to end the boycott.

Faisal was encouraging. At the next meeting of the Arab oil states, he told Akins, Saudi Arabia would formally propose an end of the boycott. But the king added, he could not be certain the proposal would carry. The phrase he used in Akins — *in-shallah* — means, in effect, "we'll work something out, but don't call us; we'll call you."

The king's message: don't put public pressure on Saudi Arabia, because that will undermine efforts to end the boycott.

Akins dutifully informed Washington. Mr. Nixon, sensing political mileage, demanded clearance to use that hopeful message in his State of the Union speech, thought at the White House to be vital to the President's survival.

But State Department Arab experts

well knew that any presidential forecast would embarrass the strongly pro-U.S. Faisal with such militant anti-U.S. Arab states as Syria and Libya. They protested. So Akins was ordered to obtain the king's private assurance.

Though angered at being subjected to such pressure, Faisal reluctantly gave his consent. At the same time, however, he made clear to Akins that any public pronouncement from the President would be hurtful. As a result, the overwhelming State Department consensus was that any hint of imminent termination of the boycott would boomrang. Some diplomats were consequently flabbergasted when they heard Mr. Nixon's actual words.

That torpedoed all the quiet diplomacy. As of this writing, the Saudis probably will not sponsor the proposal for ending the boycott at the Feb. 14 meeting in Tripoli going public. Instead, Mr. Nixon insisted on going public. In- stead, Egypt or some lesser oil state such as Abu Dhabi will have to carry the fight with members of the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC).

In fact, the boycott now may last until Israel and Syria agree on troop disengagement. That could be weeks or months away.

The ineptitude of Mr. Nixon's decision to put Faisal on the spot, knowing it would expose the king to militant Arab charges that he is really Uncle Sam's man, must be viewed against the original intent of the oil boycott. When voted by OAPEC Oct. 17 in an unprecedented display of Arab unity, it was to continue until all Israeli troops left all occupied Arab territory.

Yet Saudi Arabia had privately agreed to take the lead in ending the boycott even before completion of the first stage of Israeli pullback.

Instead of accepting Faisal's plea for *in-shallah*, however, the President needlessly stockpiled adversity for the sake of short-term political gain. The way to end the oil boycott is to stop talking about it from the White House and give King Faisal the elbow room he needs to handle his own political problems.