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SALT and Watergate

Senator Henry M. Jackson accuses President Nixon of seeking to offset his Watergate troubles by rushing into a "quick-fix" strategic arms agreement at June's summit meeting in Moscow.

The Washington Democrat has long contended that the accords signed two years ago in the initial round of strategic arms limitation talks (SALT I) seriously disadvantaged the United States. He now predicts that SALT II will be even worse, principally because of Administration readiness for selfish political reasons to entertain proposals "inimical" to this country's security.

That charge, if true, would dwarf Watergate. In our view, however, the evidence thus far all points in the opposite direction. Watergate's impact has been not to encourage Administration concessions in SALT II, but the reverse, as Secretary of State Kissinger has now acknowledged. Fearful of risking military opposition and Congressional rejection, a weakened President is bent on achieving an arms accord that not only provides Soviet-American parity but—in contrast to SALT I—is seen to assure parity. The Senators whose votes Mr. Nixon may need in the event of impeachment are mainly conservatives who are wary of SALT.

The political difficulty with SALT I was that reality and appearance did not jibe. The five-year agreement on offensive weapons appeared to give the Soviet Union advantages, mainly in numbers and throw-weight of land-based missiles. In fact, however, America's qualitative edge and a huge lead in bombers and MIRV multiple warheads assured the United States of over-all parity—and probably superiority—until the mid-1980's.

The possibility that the Administration now will be inhibited in seeking an equitable plan to halt the arms race has been recognized by Senators Mansfield and Scott, the majority and minority leaders. In a joint letter, also signed by Senators Mondale and Mathias, they urge Secretary Kissinger not to let Watergate obstruct SALT II plans. "We cannot simply call off SALT while we sort out the question of impeachment," explains Senator Mondale.

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The extraordinary campaign against realistic arms limitation mounted by Senator Jackson since 1972 has led him into innumerable distortions of the facts. Through selective use of figures this week he conveyed the false impression that SALT I limitations are being violated by the Russians and that the Soviet Union now enjoys nuclear superiority. With that as his basis, Mr. Jackson and his allies on the Joint Chiefs of Staff put forward a plan of their own under the guise of advancing arms control. But, on closer examination, this "radical" plan turns out to be manifestly unnegotiable.

It calls for small American and huge Soviet reductions to achieve quantitative "equality" in numbers and throw-weight of missiles and bombers, while leaving totally uncontrolled MIRV and qualitative factors, where the United States is far ahead. This is a prescription for preventing a SALT II agreement, assuring a continued arms race and providing a huge increase in production of nuclear warheads. That may be helpful to the Pentagon's new nuclear war-fighting strategy and to the sales of the military-industrial complex, but it would be a disaster for the country and the world.

A comprehensive SALT II agreement is clearly impossible this year, given the complexity of the issues involved and the resistance both Washington and Moscow are meeting from the military and their political allies. But it would be a tragedy if everything were not done to seek a partial agreement. It is vital to impose limits on MIRV deployment before Russia's new MIRVed missiles are emplaced in such numbers, types and locations that, as Mr. Kissinger noted, verification of a MIRV limitation would become impossible.