

Middle East 'Miracle'

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Oct. 30 — In his private briefing of Congressional leaders on why he put the armed forces of the United States on worldwide alert the other day, President Nixon took a decidedly pessimistic view of the Soviet Union's objectives in the Middle East.

If Moscow managed to get its seven airborne divisions into Egypt on the pretext of liberating the surrounded Egyptian III Corps, he said, it would be hard to get them out of there again; and once established as the protectors of the Arab states, their influence on future shipments of oil would undoubtedly increase.

The United States, he added, was not dependent on Middle East oil; we could tighten our belts and live without it; but Japan and Europe got around 80 per cent of their oil from that part of the world, and he could imagine a situation in which Soviet domination of the Middle East might lead within five or ten years to the Communization of both Japan and Western Europe.

This was an alarming picture indeed, and it persuaded the Congressional leaders that the dramatic Presidential military alert was justified by the magnitude of the threat, but it left a lot of unanswered questions.

Why, if the Soviet Union had such vast geopolitical aims, could he tell the press the following day that we had suddenly passed from "the most difficult crisis" since the Cuban missile alert to the most hopeful outlook in the Middle East in twenty years?

This still seems a bit extreme. Last month the official line here was that the "détente" between the United States and the Soviet Union was building a "generation of peace," then a few mysterious actions by Moscow put the Strategic Air Command bombers with their nuclear weapons in the air, whereupon the crisis not only ended as fast as it began, but we are back talking about "permanent" peace.

There is developing here a pattern of exaggerated language and sudden dramatic action. Nobody, of course, can know much about the Soviet Union's motives or intentions and it can be dangerous to assume their goodwill or faith; but visions of the Communization of Europe and Japan require almost as vivid an imagination as "permanent" Middle East peace.

Also, it is not at all clear what Mr. Nixon's next order would have been if the Soviets had decided to use their airborne divisions to get the Egyptian army out of the trap. Would he have tried to stop them? Or land American paratroops in Israel? Not even the Israelis would have welcomed that. After all, it's not so long ago that the Soviets had about 20,000 men in Egypt, and instead of "going Communist," the Egyptians kicked them out.

Perhaps a more modest appraisal of U.S.-Soviet relations in the Middle East is in order. "Détente" is a useful word to express a common desire on the part of the two major nuclear powers to avoid war with one another, but that's about as far as it goes.

The Soviets did not allow their promises to Mr. Nixon to prevent them from conniving with the Egyptians and Syrians to attack Israel, or to encourage the other Arab states to get into the struggle.

Moscow is trading more and more sophisticated arms for Arab oil, and as the demand for oil outruns the supply, it becomes more and more valuable to the Soviet Union as an instrument of pressure on Europe, Japan and, to a lesser extent, the United States. Obviously, the more Moscow can increase its influence over the oil-producing states, the greater her influence will be in other parts of the world as well, and this is likely to be an enduring objective of Soviet policy—and similarly a vital interest of the United States to oppose the domination of the Middle East by the Soviet Union or any other power.

Some modest gains have been made toward direct negotiations. For the first time, the Israelis and the Arabs will negotiate with one another, but Premier Golda Meir didn't decide to fly to Washington because Israel's long-range position has improved.

Israel has gained some more territory and both armies are now so mixed up on one another's lands that they will have to negotiate. But over the long run, the outlook for Israel is not better but worse. The Arabs are closing the technological military gap. They were beaten but not destroyed, and they are not likely to take time, as Mrs. Meir put it, "to enjoy their defeat."

The outlook, unfortunately, is not for "permanent" peace. Israel still wants secure borders, all the more so after the fourth war in a generation, and this means holding on to territory the Arabs are determined to get back.

Meanwhile, with Washington and Moscow playing international poker for their own interests, Israel finds herself in the awkward situation of having both the United States and the Soviet Union leaning on her to stop fighting whenever she gets close to destroying the armies that have attacked her.

In short, the Big-Two détente may work to stop wars when both want to stop them but it doesn't seem to prevent them, and the result of war every few years does not benefit the smaller Israeli state but clearly benefits the Arabs.