

As the President Packs His Bags

By ROBERT KEATLEY

P: . . . what the hell, it is a little melodramatic, but it is totally true that what happens in this office in these next four years will probably determine whether there is a chance and it's never been done, that you could have some sort of uneasy peace for the next 25 years.

E: Uh, huh.

P: And that's my—whatever legacy we have, hell, it isn't going to be in getting a cesspool for Winnetka, it is going to be there.

E: Yep, yep.

So said President Nixon on April 14, 1973 while explaining his grander visions to his faithful former aide, John Ehrlichman. This fragment of conversation from the Watergate tapes is one more proof, in case another is needed, that Richard Nixon's chief presidential preoccupation is with foreign policy, that "generation of peace" he talks about whenever he hits the hustings these days.

Thus foreign travel dominates his schedule as would-be impeachers trudge toward a congressional showdown. Mr. Nixon leaves Monday for a trip to at least five Mideast countries, a presidential first (excluding a World War II FDR stop in Cairo). Back home for a few days, Mr. Nixon will then visit his Communist friends in the Kremlin where a warm welcome and highfalutin summitry are on tap. Despite cries of "Resign" and "Impeachment," the President vows he can't shirk his diplomatic duties.

The reasons he gives are noble. Without himself at the helm, Mr. Nixon said recently, the world may see a "conflagration" which could destroy "everything that this civilization has produced."

Despite this dire prediction, though, doubts are voiced about whether Mr. Nixon can or should remain master of America's diplomatic machine. Some critics allege he is so weakened by Watergate that he may sign agreements with foreigners which undermine the national interest—in effect, signing anything that lets him claim success and help save his job. For example, persistent critic Sen. Henry Jackson (D., Wash.) says the President may settle for "a quick fix" in arms control rather than admit nothing substantial can be concluded while he's in Moscow next month.

The Moscow summit "should really be deferred till this [impeachment] matter is cleared up one way or another," concludes Republican Sen. Richard Schweiker of Pennsylvania, who wants Mr. Nixon to resign.

'The Problem of Authority'

The issue is not a frivolous one. No less an authority than Secretary of State Henry Kissinger has said "the problem of authority is always essential to the conduct of foreign policy and, therefore, over a period of time it is bound to affect the conduct or the ability to conduct foreign policy." (He adds, of course, that he hasn't noticed any such impact to date.)

There is no easy answer. It would be wrong to conclude that Mr. Nixon is totally incapable of managing foreign policy because there is opposition at home. Yet it seems equally wrong to claim he can sail blithely along as if domestic problems don't even exist. Perhaps the best that can be said is that Mr. Nixon will have continuing difficulties with foreign affairs, and these may yet be compounded because he's weakened by Watergate.

But a more important reason for expecting difficulties is simply that the American President does not and cannot control events abroad. Either due to Watergate or for totally unconnected reasons,

both allies and adversaries may cause this country more trouble than it now foresees in the months ahead. Therefore, while diplomacy may well bring him some credit, it doesn't guarantee political salvation.

Senator Jackson is the most outspoken critic of the centerpiece of Mr. Nixon's diplomacy: detente with Russia, including the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks, or SALT. It is in this crucial superpower relationship, he asserts, that Mr. Nixon's home-front weakness may be most exploited particularly by a "soft" SALT deal which would let the President claim progress at the expense of national security.

But there seem to be at least two reasons why this shouldn't happen, even if one

More important than what Americans do is what foreigners do, and this includes how they react to Mr. Nixon's troubles. . . The key thing to watch is the course of detente.

concedes Mr. Nixon would tamper with national defenses to save himself from impeachment.

Within the Executive Branch, there can't be any SALT proposal (or other significant initiative toward the Russians) unless all major agencies agree. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, for their part, aren't about to run risks with national security no matter how much they'd like to help the President. Their ability to block deals inside the government, or to make their case public if overruled, is well known. Thus a Nixon effort to seek a flashy, but risky, SALT agreement would probably bring him not applause but the last thing he needs these days—another big controversy.

There's a related political consideration. At minimum, the President wants 34 favorable votes in the Senate to stave off conviction if an impeachment bill clears the House as predicted. But any appearance of playing fast and loose with national security would risk alienating those Senate conservatives who so far give him at least grudging support. This consideration could rule out dangerous initiatives, despite what critics say.

There are other reasons why Mr. Nixon can't continue as if Watergate didn't happen. Detente includes more than SALT, and on some of the other issues, such as trade and credits, Mr. Nixon needs help if his commitments to the Kremlin are to be honored. Yet if he is in trouble with Congress and has little credibility with the public, his ability to exercise leadership ranges from impaired to nonexistent. The fate of his pending \$5.18 billion foreign aid bill, one more closely related to specific foreign policy objectives than most predecessors, could provide another example.

It is on such issues, perhaps, that Mr. Kissinger believes "the problem of authority" is "essential." It's even conceivable that the loyal Secretary of State himself may come to wish for a new Chief Executive so diplomacy may be better served by the American public and Congress.

He may even have entertained such thoughts during his five weeks' shuttle in search of an Israeli-Syrian troop disengagement agreement. It kept him away from Washington as other work piled up, including reorganization of a State Department he seldom sees and lobbying for foreign aid, plus pondering the meaning of such disparate events as India's nuclear breakthrough and China's internal political uncertainties.

Mideast peace is a central U.S. objective, and that won't come unless troop sep-

aration is achieved; there is great merit in Mr. Kissinger's finally successful endeavor. But there's suspicion he kept jettisoning, rather than call a recess, partly because the boss wouldn't let him come home. Mr. Nixon wants to take a triumphal tour of the Mideast to prove he remains an effective world leader despite Watergate, and for that there must first be disengagement. Thus the Secretary may have stayed on so long in the Mideast because Mr. Nixon wants both a "generation of peace" and his job.

More important than what Americans do, however, is what foreigners do, and this includes how they react to Mr. Nixon's troubles. Again, the key thing to watch is the course of detente.

Speculation has it that the Soviets will now seek extra advantages because they think Mr. Nixon is weak. But so far there isn't discernible evidence of that. Instead, the Russian press continues to praise the President for rapprochement, (though it has begun to hint that Mr. Nixon may be forced from office). In a recent Pravda article, political commentator Yuri Zhukov said he has "confidence that the forthcoming Soviet-U.S. summit talks will be a new step forward toward the process of detente becoming irreversible."

Debate in the Politburo?

But Soviet specialists here wonder if the Kremlin is really that sanguine. Some assume there's heated debate in the Politburo about whether to proceed normally with the U.S., rather than to exploit the Nixon problems somehow. It's suspected that Russian generals and Communist ideologues opposed to detente are advising that this is the time to seek advantage in American politics. It's possible a Russian parliamentary delegation, headed by a candidate member of the ruling Politburo, recently toured the U.S. partly to assess American politics and make policy recommendations to Mr. Brezhnev and his colleagues.

But Soviet policy won't necessarily change. "Brezhnev may argue that the right policy remains a continuation of detente—buying as much political stability as possible despite Nixon's troubles," says an analyst. Any such decision will have major impact on Mr. Nixon's diplomatic success, or lack of it, but it's one essentially beyond his control.

The same is true regarding two other pillars of Nixon policy: dealings with the Mideast and with China. U.S. actions will influence events but political dynamics inside China and in the Mideast will be determining factors.

Even if things go right diplomatically, there's no guarantee the President will get full credit. He may have a sort of Frankenstein's monster in Mr. Kissinger, the world's foremost diplomatist these days and one widely praised for the better aspects of U.S. policy. No matter how often the White House insists the Secretary acts only under "guidance" of the President, it is the State Department boss who is perceived as both innovator and implementer of policy.

Therefore, both Americans and foreigners may be perfectly willing to let the President depart because they expect Mr. Kissinger to stay, ensuring continuity. Congress may well reject the Nixon suggestion that he has become indispensable to world peace. Though foreign policy successes may cause his critics to concede the Nixon presidency has redeeming value, that may not be enough to provide his political salvation.

Mr. Keatley, a member of the Journal's Washington bureau, covers foreign affairs.