

Nixon's Campaign Strategy

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Aug. 17—The Nixon campaign strategy of dominating the news by bold foreign policy moves is working as planned and keeping Senator George McGovern constantly on the defensive.

About the only time Mr. McGovern has been able to take over the big headlines and the television screens since his nomination was when he was in trouble with his various Vice-Presidential candidates.

The rest of the time Mr. Nixon has kept the initiative by sending Henry Kissinger to Paris and Saigon, by dispatching Secretary of Commerce Peterson to Moscow to talk trade, by announcing vast wheat sales to the Soviet Union, and by planning summit meetings with the Japanese and speeches before the United Nations in September.

Meanwhile, he got an unexpected break in the withdrawal of the Soviet troops and technicians from Egypt, and while this is likely to cause him some embarrassment when Moscow and Cairo press him to get the Israelis to begin withdrawing from the Suez Canal, the chances are that he will be able to delay action on this one until after the voting in November.

Even I. F. Stone, no fan of the Nixon Administration, wrote the other day: "Nixon's trade and credit negotiations with Moscow have bought him a free hand in the Middle East. This is the real meaning of President Sadat's action in expelling most of the Soviet military from Egypt. The carrot-and-stick tactics which led both Moscow and Peking to continue their rapprochement with Nixon despite the escalated bombing and mining of North Vietnam's harbors have proven fruitful, too, in the Arab-Israeli conflict. . . ."

Mr. Nixon was very careful not to permit any boasting or gloating out of Washington when Sadat sent the Soviets packing for home. In accordance with the statement of principles he signed with the general secretary of the Communist party in Moscow,

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Leonid I. Brezhnev, he recognized that "efforts to obtain unilateral advantage, at the expense of the other, directly or indirectly, are inconsistent with these [principles]," so he shut up.

Also, when he seemed to be going too far in agreeing with Senator Henry Jackson of Washington in amending the first strategic arms agreement signed in Moscow, he quickly pulled back in order to preserve the progress made with Brezhnev.

Thus both Washington and Moscow are making clear that they are not going to allow their differences in Southeast Asia or the Middle East to interfere with their larger national objective of avoiding a major U.S.-Soviet confrontation, and as the Big Republican Convention pictures of Mr. Nixon and the Communist leaders indicate, this will clearly be a major argument in the President's re-election campaign.

As Roosevelt, Truman and Lyndon Johnson demonstrated when they were campaigning from the White House, it is not necessary for Presidents to score great diplomatic achievements in order to dominate their opponents. They merely have to use Presidential power to set the tone and the major questions of the campaign, and that's what Mr. Nixon has been doing.

All the recent diplomatic activity has not produced any spectacular results. If Kissinger's "friendly persuasion" had really made progress on his last trip to the Paris peace talks, it seems unlikely that Mr. Nixon would have ordered "more than 370 tactical strikes" on North Vietnam, some of them close to Hanoi, precisely when the principal North Vietnamese negotiator in Paris, Le Duc Tho, was arriving in Hanoi for consultations with his Government.

Similarly, Secretary Peterson didn't manage to settle U.S.-Soviet trade differences on his recent mission to Moscow, but like Kissinger he kept the movement toward accommodation going, and that's about all the Administration has to do in order to present the picture of a President seeking new accommodations with the major Communist powers while waging war on one of their allies and getting away with it.

Also, anybody who ventures to suggest that there might be some better way to end the war in Vietnam or even points to the dangers of bombing the dikes in North Vietnam is immediately attacked, not usually by Mr. Nixon but by one of his political surrogates.

Not only Ramsey Clark and Pierre Salinger were accused of interfering with the Administration's peace plans, but the Secretary General of the United Nations was roundly condemned by the President and Secretary of State Rogers for suggesting that the U.S. was consciously bombing the dikes—which he never said.

Nevertheless, the Nixon strategy is at least achieving its short-term objective. It has kept Senator McGovern from gaining the initiative in the period between the two conventions, when he had hoped to put the President on the defensive.

McGovern had some good ammunition in the Watergate fiasco and the concealed Republican campaign funds and the escalated bombing, now more severe than ever; but every time he mounted the platform, Kissinger or somebody else was flying off on some big mission that put him back with the grocery ads.