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SECRETARY KISSINGER took on a vital job at his news conference yesterday. He moved forthrightly to dispose of the deadly suggestion that at the first Nixon-Brezhnev summit in 1972, the administration had secretly agreed to allow Moscow more missiles and Washington fewer missiles than was publicly announced. The alleged missile disparity might not have been of much military consequence. But a proven disparity between administration pronouncement and actual fact would have aggravated greatly the substantial problem Mr. Nixon already faces in persuading the public that he is still fit to conduct foreign policy. On the eve of his third summit meeting with Mr. Brezhnev, the one thing Mr. Nixon does not need is another challenge to his negotiating authority. Secretary Kissinger, whose credibility is also under challenge in the matter of wiretaps, could scarcely have gone on if his word on missiles had been shown to be untrue.

This truly profound crisis arose last Friday from a statement issued by Sen. Henry M. Jackson (D-Wash.), who is at once the administration's leading critic—from the right—on defense issues and a 1976 Presidential hopeful. Newly disclosed Soviet-American "understandings," said Mr. Jackson, would allow the Russians up to 70 more than the 950 modern sub-launched missiles permitted under the five-year interim agreement on offensive weapons signed in 1972. Similarly, he added, the administration had privately assured Moscow it would build up the American sub force only to 656 missiles rather than to the 710 permitted by the agreement over its five-year span. Sen. Jackson, readers will recall, recently warned that the President's political need for a foreign policy triumph could induce him to make an unwise "quick fix" nuclear deal at the Moscow summit, which begins later this week. His statements of last Friday added to the impression that Mr. Nixon is unreliable and should not be heading for the Kremlin at all.

Dr. Kissinger, however, gave what struck us as a persuasive answer. He produced hitherto secret documents demonstrating that, even if the Russians do put new modern missiles on their old G-class subs—something, by the way, which not even Mr. Jackson expects them to do—then these missiles must fall under the public 950 ceiling. This American interpretation was put in writing after the 1973 summit and, Secretary Kissinger emphasized, reading from the document itself, the Russians signed it—and have respected it.

Secretary Kissinger acknowledged that President Nixon had indeed "told" Mr. Brezhnev that the United States would not use the option, written into the same agreement, to convert certain land-based missiles to sea-

based missiles in order to increase its sea force from 656 to the permitted 710. The reason for not so converting was that the United States was on the verge of announcing its program to build the new Trident subs, due for launching not earlier than 1978, the year after the five-year interim agreement of 1972 was to expire; so why build more old subs in the interim? The United States had claimed the *right* to convert, the Secretary added, to match the same right claimed by the Russians. And why did Mr. Nixon tell Mr. Brezhnev? Because the Trident program would quickly become apparent to Moscow in any event, and as "a gesture . . . that leaders sometimes engage in for the general atmosphere of relationships." Is this "startling," in Mr. Jackson's word? Hardly.

Secretary Kissinger seems to have removed a dark and dangerous cloud from the administration's diplomacy. But Senator Jackson, who did not find reason to raise these challenges to the 1972 agreement until the week before the upcoming summit, seems reluctant to concede that he has not provided substantial evidence to sustain his challenges. So the affair may not yet be at a close.

The episode reveals, however an important flaw—fortunately a remediable flaw—in the administration's approach to arms control negotiations. There was indeed some secret back-and-forth with the Russians over the G-class subs. The result of it did not alter the public record but the trace of it, once it became evident, was bound to arouse questions—that are all the harder to handle in the Watergate atmosphere. Similarly, if Mr. Nixon—knowing that the Trident program was about to begin—could confide to Mr. Brezhnev that therefore the United States would not use its option to put 710 missiles to sea by 1977, why could he not tell the same to Congress and the public? In both instances, sensible decisions that would not have suffered from the light of day came to look somewhat dubious, and provided fodder to critics, when they first emerged in hearings before Congress. If Senator Jackson has played harder than he might in fulfilling his responsibility for congressional review, then the administration might have precluded any play at all by earlier putting more of the Soviet-American exchanges on the public record.

No doubt the Russians were somewhat agog to find Secretary Kissinger going public with material the Russians would not dream of presenting to their own public. But they must learn—and perhaps they are learning—that the reason for going public is not the trivial one of easing some politician's embarrassment but the basic and beneficial one of reinforcing American public support for arms control agreements in the mutual interest.