

Saving an Awkward Day

Tito's Decision to Keep to Schedule Helped Nixon to Reduce His Losses

By MAX FRANKEL **SEP 30 1970**
Special to The New York Times

NAPLES, Italy, Sept. 29 — Deflected by the death of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the high command of the United States Government wondered today, like everyone else, what happens next along the shores of the Mediterranean.

With his naval guns respectfully muzzled and his Middle East negotiation plan indefinitely suspended, President Nixon could stage only a routine "show of force" out beyond the Isle of Capri and then look across Italy to the maverick Communists of Yugoslavia to help him salvage some significance from his journey around the fringes of Europe.

The Navy did its best, flaunting muscle without the scheduled noise. Mr. Nixon did his best, promising to keep the peace in this region against aggressors, who went nameless for the moment.

Marshal Tito saved the day, surprising the entire Presidential party with a decision to pass up the funeral of his Egyptian friend and to hold to his schedule for the American President, whom he has never met.

This awkward day ended, therefore, with a swift cutting of losses on all sides and a glad turning toward tomorrow.

To the extent that Mr. Nixon's hurriedly arranged trip to the Mediterranean had any strategic purpose, it was to remind the Soviet leaders — and President Nasser, among others — of his readiness to match their military diplomacy with his own and thus to persuade them to pursue their interests by peaceful means.

Grave Mistrust Aroused

The Soviet and Egyptian violations of the Suez Canal standstill agreement, followed by the invasion of Jordan from pro-Soviet Syria, had aroused in Washington the gravest mistrust of current Soviet judgment and intent. Ever fearful that the Kremlin would read American society, or the President personally, as timid and irresolute, Mr. Nixon seized on the message of "power" from the moment he stepped off his plane in Italy Sunday night.

He told his hosts in Rome that he had come to reaffirm a strong American presence in this region. He paid homage yesterday to the Pope's "spiritual power" by noting that he had come to see "the mightiest military force which exists in the world on any ocean."

In honoring the power of the faith of the North American college at the Vatican, Mr. Nixon said he was "speaking very humbly, as President of the strongest nation in the world, with more power, perhaps, than any leader in the world."

"Believe me," Mr. Nixon told the sailors of the carrier Saratoga last night, "never has

American power, I think, been used with more effectiveness" then it has been in the recent weeks of Middle East tension. "When power is used in such a way that you do not have to go to the ultimate test, then it is really effective," he added.

Then, in the midst of that exercise, came word of Mr. Nasser's death. Mr. Nixon's quick statement of tribute, the order to still the guns in deference to the Egyptian leader's admirers in nearby countries and the news that Aleksei N. Kosygin, the Soviet Premier, would lead the mourners at the funeral Thursday, in token of Moscow's huge investment in Egypt.

Mr. Nixon, at sea with his Secretaries of State and Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other principal aides, toyed briefly with the thought of a detour to Cairo.

Some Tough Questions

Did he have to match the Soviet gesture? Did he dare ask Marshal Tito to skip the funeral on his account? What would happen to the "show of force" if he retreated in confusion now? How would the Russians, or the Israelis, regard a President who could be driven off his course by the Egyptian leader, even in death?

With the help of the Yugoslavs, Mr. Nixon was able to hold his course. As he demonstrated with a visit to Rumania last year—acknowledging the Rumanians' warm reception of him even in his darkest days of political defeat at home—he does not forget a gesture rendered in need.

Neither, it is evident, does the president forget the lessons in international politics that he learned in the Administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles—lessons in "detering aggression," as he has put it, by going to the brink of military action, lessons on suspicion about Soviet "probes" of American strength and will, and lessons in political exploitation at home of the doctrine of "peace through strength."

The indications are that Mr. Nixon's entourage is worried by the Soviet military thrust into the Middle East and beyond and that the President is eager to demonstrate that he will not shrink from confrontation if there is no other way to engage Moscow in meaningful negotiations—on arms control or any other issue.

While his message had to be muted today, Mr. Nixon will no doubt pass it along through Marshal Tito and any other channel that becomes available. Reflecting this evening on the frustration of the last 24 hours, White House officials conceded nothing to the critics who had wondered whether this trip was really necessary. With new uncertainties in Egypt ahead, they said, it is more important than ever.