

U.S. Uproar Clouds Nixon Gains Abroad

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The Nixon administration is on the verge of proclaiming dramatic success for its diplomacy in the Middle East, with the unusual prospect that many Americans may be too traumatized to be impressed.

Although the future of the Arab-Israeli crisis remains very clouded, the superpower accord on a cease-fire, appears to be providing the first successful test of the durability of East-West detente.

Normally, the Nixon administration could expect the nation to join in hailing this outcome as a glowing

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result of detente diplomacy. Instead, this prime example of President Nixon's constant desire to muffle domestic tension with international drama is itself being drowned out by national uproar.

The administration exerted unusual efforts behind the scenes, according to informed sources, to invoke the primacy of international security requirements as an argument to forestall the devastating rebound that did follow its ouster of Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox.

White House press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler only hinted at that campaign behind the scenes when he said, Saturday night, that Cox set out "to defy instructions from the President . . . at a time of serious world crisis . . ."

For a week before Cox's ouster, sources reported, Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson was the subject of unusual top-level administration attention to impress upon him the serious magnitude of the Middle East crisis, while Richardson was considering his own course of action in the White House crisis over Cox.

If Richardson could have been induced to stand fast,

that also would have precluded the resignation of Deputy Attorney General William D. Ruckelshaus, for following Richardson in refusing to fire Cox. White House strategy would have "contained" the Cox ouster as a much less explosive national issue.

Richardson is said to have been flooded with reports about the Middle East, with information originating from the President, from Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, and from White House chief of staff Alexander M. Haig Jr.

"They filled him (Richardson) with Mideast briefings," a source said; "the subject came up every day." One-half of the telephone calls from the White House to Richardson during the week preceding the disclosure of Cox's removal were said to concern the Middle East. Haig, it was said, often called to talk with Richardson about the Middle East, and then shifted to the problem concerning Cox.

Richardson is said to have "discussed" the possibility of submitting his resignation confidentially, and withholding announcement of that until the Mideast crisis was over.

As events developed, Richardson concluded that he had to make his stand publicly. In his letter of resignation, he did thank the President for the opportunity to share in attempts "to make the structure of world peace more stable . . ."

Briefings given Richardson on the Middle East were based on his role as an invited participant in National Security Council meetings—although the council rarely meets formally—and as a former Secretary of Defense and former Deputy Secretary of State. What was out of pattern, sources said, was the unusual intensity of Middle East briefings for the Attorney General.

Ruckelshaus, who has much more remote official

responsibility in the field of foreign affairs, is reported to have been urged by Haig to give special concern to the gravity of the international situation resulting from the Middle East crisis, in choosing his own course of action. He, too, concluded, as his letter of resignation to the President said, that "my conscience will not permit me to carry out your instruction to discharge Archibald Cox."

With the departure from the Nixon administration of Richardson and Ruckelshaus, insiders pointed out, only Kissinger is left of what had been an influential grouping of men at the top level, who regarded themselves as middle-road Republicans who shared a similar outlook on international affairs. Former Secretary of Commerce Peter G. Petersen, who earlier fell from White House favor, was a member of this group.

The entire interaction between the Middle East crisis, and the Cox-Richardson-Ruckelshaus departures, is yet to be disclosed. The critical exchanges that set in motion Kissinger's secret trip to Moscow early last Saturday morning, resulting in the American-Soviet accord on the Arab-Israeli cease-fire, also remain to be unveiled.

What is especially ironic for the administration is that the present domestic political-constitutional crisis this time is robbing it of public acclaim for what may be a more significant international accomplishment than many lesser actions in the past that were exploited to muffle criticism of administration policy.

The Middle East crisis showed that the structure of American-Soviet detente was inadequate to forestall a war that endangered the superpowers' ties. But the cross-interests woven in the name of detente enabled the superpowers to act in parallel to limit damage to detente and, hopefully, to prove it can withstand a war by client states, although the final outcome is still unseen.