

WXPost
**President's
Leadership
Is Questioned**

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The question of President Nixon's ability to lead a doubting nation in an international crisis was raised on the public record yesterday as the United States and the Soviet Union appeared briefly to be on a confrontation course in the Middle East.

The question came up four times in its most dramatic way at Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger's news conference when he was pressed as to whether the precautionary alert of American forces had been prompted by domestic considerations and was credible.

Kissinger was asked, in questions that later drew sharp attack from Capitol Hill, whether the President had made "a totally rational decision" and whether the American decision was based on a "handful of smoke" or on "solid" facts.

In Chicago, presidential counselor Melvin R. Laird faced the same questions and, like Kissinger, denied that domestic politics played any part in the Nixon decision.

On Capitol Hill, after a variety of charges and countercharges, House Majority Leader Thomas P. O'Neill (D-Mass.) told the House that "in my mind, there is absolutely nothing political" about the President's actions.

Later, O'Neill told reporters that "too many members of my own party were snidely saying that the President is a political animal and they doubted there was a crisis."

Kissinger acknowledged that Watergate had cost the nation heavily, but he emo-

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Frank Johnston—The Washington Post

President Nixon, Kissinger and Haig leave White House.

President's Ability To Lead Nation in Crisis Questioned

PRESIDENT From A1

tionally defended the President. The Secretary of State, asked whether the Soviet Union had been "a target of opportunity because of the President's weakness over Watergate, replied:

"Speculations about motives are always dangerous. But one cannot have crises of authority in a society for a period of months without paying a price somewhere along the line."

Kissinger had made a similar comment in June at the end of Soviet leader Leonid I. Brezhnev's visit to the United States. At that time, the Senate Watergate investigating committee had postponed the appearance of former presidential counsel John W. Dean III until after the Brezhnev visit to avoid embarrassing the President during a summit meeting. Some listeners yesterday speculated that Kissinger might be hinting Mr. Nixon was considering resignation because he recognized the weakness he faced abroad as a result of his shrinking support at home.

But officials flatly denied that was the thought behind Kissinger's comments, and at the White House there was the usual emphatic answer that Mr. Nixon has not considered resigning and will not resign.

One official said that the President not only would defend his record at today's scheduled news conference but would take the offensive against his detractors.

One of the first questions at Kissinger's press conference was whether the American alert might have been prompted by domestic considerations.

Kissinger replied, "It is a symptom of what is happening to our country that it could even be suggested that the United States would alert its forces for domestic reasons." When the record is published, he added, it will be seen that "the President had no other choice."

Later, another reporter asked whether Kissinger

supported the decision, whether the President initiated the alert "and do you feel [it was] a totally rational decision?"

Kissinger said that because of the "particular implications of your remark, I may say that all of the President's senior advisers, all the members of the National Security Council, were unanimous in their recommendation."

The advisers reached their conclusions before Mr. Nixon joined the deliberations, Kissinger emphasized.

When finally, a reporter asked Kissinger why a "badly shaken" electorate should believe him, the secretary replied with considerable feeling:

"We are attempting to preserve the peace in very difficult circumstances. It is up to you ladies and gentlemen to determine whether this is the moment you try to create a crisis of confidence in the field of foreign policy as well."

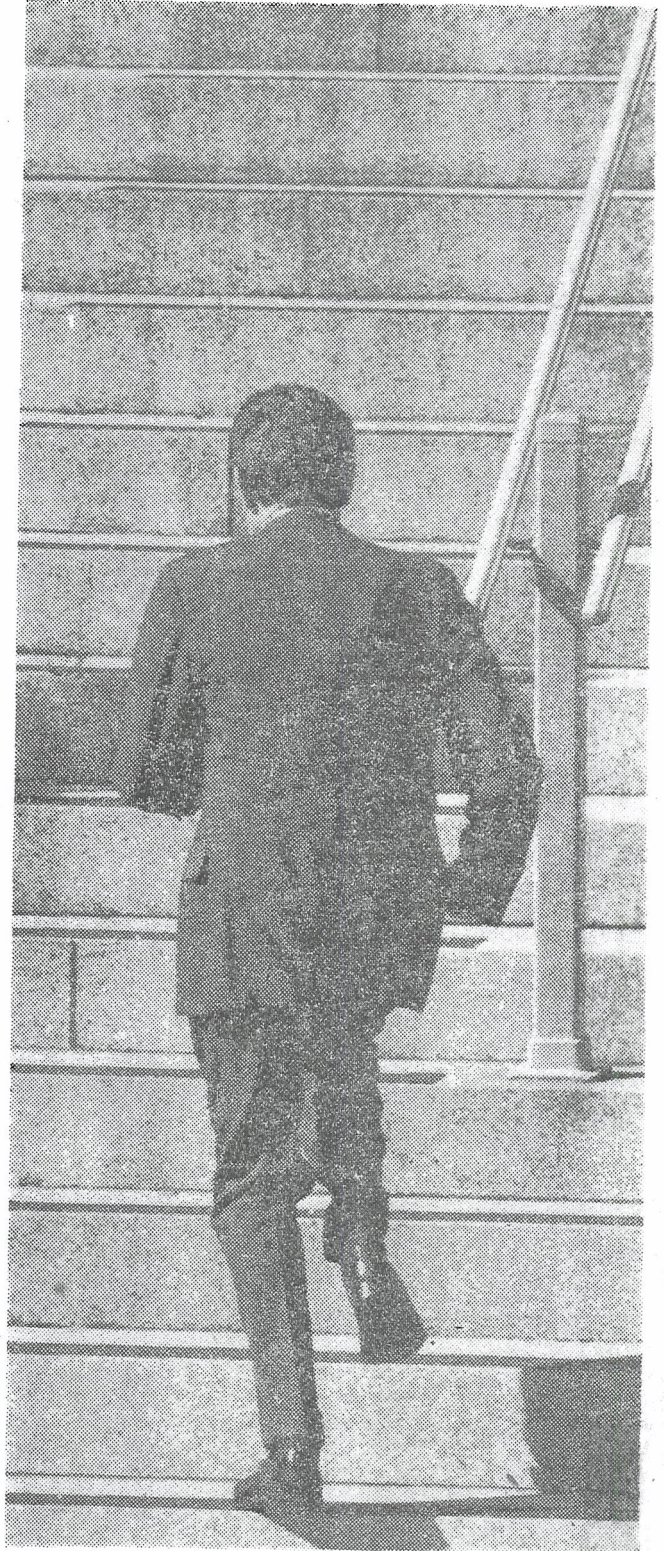
In a week or so, he added, the facts will be put on the record. "But there has to be a minimum of confidence that the senior officials of the American government are not playing with the lives of the American people," he said.

The blunt questions put to Kissinger at his press conference echoed some questions raised earlier in telephone calls to newspaper offices and in some broadcasts.

Nevertheless, they obviously irritated Kissinger and other Nixon administration officials, one of whom said he was "incensed" by them.

They were resented by some Nixon supporters on Capitol Hill, including Sen. Barry M. Goldwater (R-Ariz.), a long-time critic of the press. He issued a statement denouncing "the hounds of destruction" in the media and declaring that some of the questions asked Kissinger "bordered on stupidity and the ridiculous."

These questions go to the heart of the issue of the



United Press International

Mr. Nixon hurries up Executive Office Building steps.

President's capacity to conduct foreign policy successfully from a weak position at home.

From the beginning of the Watergate crisis, administration spokesmen have argued that while Mr. Nixon's ability to act on the domestic front might be limited by a hostile Congress, he nevertheless could act on a grand scale in the conduct of foreign policy.

The questions asked yes-

terday raise doubts even about that.

If the crisis had been more prolonged and more divisive, the President's credentials would have been put to a harsher test. In no other recent foreign policy crisis — the Middle East and Hungarian crises of the Eisenhower years, the missile crisis of the Kennedy administration, the Tonkin Gulf crisis of the early Johnson years — were such blunt questions raised about a President's credibility.