

'A Crisis A Day'

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Oct. 25—The main thing is that a direct confrontation between the policies and military forces of the United States and the Soviet Union in the Middle East has been avoided for the time being, but you have to wonder how long the American people are going to be dragged along the brink by a jumpy Government they no longer trust.

This town is seething with doubt and suspicion. The Watergate scandals, the disgrace of Vice President Agnew, the resignation of Elliott Richardson, the firing of Archibald Cox and William Ruckelhaus, the indictments of Cabinet officers and White House aides, and the endless rumors of financial fiddling have all taken their toll.

The impression given here is of an uncertain Administration, defying the courts and Congress one day and submitting the next, announcing Presidential speeches or press conferences in the morning and canceling them in the afternoon, giving promises and breaking them, and over-reacting to imagined conspiracies at home and imminent catastrophes abroad.

Let us assume, as I do, that the President ordered a world-wide alert of U.S. military forces solely because he had genuine reasons for believing that the Soviet Union was about to

WASHINGTON

send Soviet troops into the Middle East. Assume also that this move was no contrivance to divert attention from the President's domestic troubles.

Things are bad enough without inventing dishonorable motives that can't be proved. The Administration did not say so directly, but the fact is that it did have solid information (1) that the U.S.S.R. had put seven airborne divisions on "high alert"; (2) that the big transports that had been air-lifting war matériel from the Soviet Union to Egypt were suddenly withdrawn; and (3) that these transports were diverted to the Soviet Union close to the places where the seven Soviet airborne divisions were located.

Also Soviet diplomats, furious at the Israelis for grabbing more territory after the cease-fire, began talking in rough and threatening tones, and Senator Scoop Jackson of Washington reports that Moscow delivered a highly ominous note to the United States on the eve of the U.S. military alert.

This was obviously a delicate moment. The Soviets were either maneuvering to scare the Israelis back to the cease-fire lines, a typical use of Soviet power, or they were preparing to occupy Egypt, destroy the détente with Washington, and even risk war with the United States.

The President chose to assume the worst. He did not merely alert the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean; he alerted everything worldwide, and this raises some interesting questions. After all we have heard about the "hot line" between the White House and the Kremlin, the trustful personal relations between Secretary Kissinger and Ambassador Dobrynin of the Soviet Union, and the new "partnership for peace" between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., are we to believe that the only way Mr. Nixon can send Mr. Brezhnev the message is to put American forces all over the world on alert?

Mr. Kissinger apparently believes the answer is yes. When all the facts can be made known, he told the reporters, "I'm absolutely confident that it will be seen that the President had no other choice as a responsible national leader."

If this is the kind of world we're living in, the crisis of confidence in the Administration at home is all the more serious, for even when he is faced with a genuine problem, as he was in the Soviet maneuvers, the President is accused of handling it in a spectacular way to defend himself.

If he had made any one of the concessions he was forced to make under fire, he might have avoided the present poisonous atmosphere. But now if he hands over the tapes, people say he has doctored them, and even when he staggers from one move to another, he is met with the cynical remark: "A crisis a day keeps impeachment away."

"It is a symptom of what is happening to our country," Secretary Kissinger said in his press conference, "that it could even be suggested that the United States would alert its forces for domestic reasons."

One reporter asked Mr. Kissinger if the Soviets thought the President was so weakened that they could take advantage of his weakness, and the Secretary didn't dismiss the notion.

"Speculation about motives is always dangerous," he said, "but one cannot have crises of authority in a society for a period of months without paying a price somewhere along the line."

The price at home, however, is higher than the price abroad. Overseas, Mr. Nixon still has immense power, and when he deploys it, skillfully or otherwise, he can still get results, as the Middle East situation demonstrates.

Not so in Washington. "There has to be a minimum of confidence," Secretary Kissinger said, "that the senior officials of the American Government are not playing with the lives of the American people."

This is precisely true, and the tragedy is that even in this latest Middle East crisis, the President didn't get that "minimum of confidence," which is why, even when his brinkmanship works, the movement for a new Government goes on.