

The Gravity of the Mideast Crisis

"If Nixon hadn't put part of SAC in the air and ordered the rest of the U.S. military alert, you would have seen Soviet airborne divisions in the air, en route to Egypt and maybe Sinai, before noon that same day."

This cheery summary by one of the wiser men of the government ought to suggest that we have not properly appreciated the extreme gravity of last week's Mideastern crisis. The more that is learned of the background, the more the same lesson emerges. The first part of the lesson concerns the Soviets' real aim in sponsoring the Arab attack on Israel at such vast cost.

Suppose the Arab attack had succeeded. The Soviets would then have had the glorious aura, for all Arabs, of the ultimate revenge-givers. The Suez Canal would also have been opened for them, permitting them to pour powerful naval armaments into the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. (This they can never really do, so long as Vladivostok, half a world away, is the ultimate supply source for the Soviet navy in these areas.)

With all this increase of glory and especially of power, the Soviets would also have been in a wholly new position with the historically anti-Communist "oil Arabs" of the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf. Both areas are in fact ideally suited to gunboat diplomacy. And so the Soviets could finally have exerted some sort of control over the flow of the damnable oil that is now the lifeblood of Japan and the West.

The stakes in the gamble, then, were remarkably high. The evidence is rather clear, however, that the Soviet government approached this enormous gamble with the same division of counsel that led to the long backing and filling before the brutal invasion of Czechoslovakia. In this case, the division seems to have been between the prudent men and the risk-takers.

Thus, one must assume that the risk-takers were responsible for the seven Soviet airborne divisions west of the

Urals entering the first stage of alert. This was at the very beginning of the war, when the Arabs were doing extremely well. It looked as though the Arabs were also going to get some important Soviet help. And, as revealed in this space at that time, an ultrastern message therefore went from President Nixon to General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev.

After this message, since the Arabs were still doing well, the prudent men in the Kremlin no doubt insisted on leaving well enough alone. Then, however, the Arabs began to do very badly. And the prudent men there insisted on Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger being called to Moscow for the meeting that produced the U.N. resolution on a cease-fire in place.

Even following that meeting, however, the Egyptian situation deteriorated rapidly. Probably the Egyptians also balked violently at the Brezhnev-Kissinger agreement on the need for face-to-face Arab-Israeli negotiations so long refused by the Arabs. Hence, the Kremlin's risk-takers reasserted themselves. Pretty certainly, the risk-takers only won the day on the argument. "Well, let's see how the Americans react: if worse comes to worst, we can always pull back." Lenin's dictum about probing for soft spots with bayonets is relevant here. At any rate, three of the seven airborne divisions went to the highest stage of alert, with troops waiting on the airfield to take off with their arms. The big transports were also coming in to collect them.

Simultaneously, Leonid Brezhnev sent his chilling note to the President announcing that the Soviets were sending their own forces to the Mideast to police the cease-fire ordered by the U.N. In delivering the note to Secretary Kissinger late last Wednesday (Oct. 24), Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin was far from being his familiar, smiling self. In short, the President and Secretary Kissinger had a cruel decision to make.

Sen. J. William Fulbright (D-Ark.)

now says that the whole thing was a false alarm, no doubt after consulting one of his favorite counselors, Ambassador Dobrynin. Less optimistic persons will agree, however, that if the Soviet bayonet-probe had met nothing but mush in President Nixon, the airborne divisions would indeed have taken off last Thursday (Oct. 25). And one supposes that even Sen. Fulbright would not argue that Soviet airborne divisions in Egypt and the Sinai desert would then have limited themselves to "peace-keeping."

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