



The Foreign and Domestic Crisis

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FLASHES of brilliant improvisation have marked the performance of the President and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in dealing with the latest war in the Near East. Still their activities abroad do not cancel Watergate and the domestic crisis it set in motion. On the contrary, the foreign and domestic crises combine to show how difficult it is for Mr. Nixon to govern.

Three particular actions by the administration in the present Mideast crisis deserve special praise. First, there was the President's decision on October 13 to order a full-scale supply effort to Israel. The American airlift permitted Israel to take the offensive and redressed the balance in the eastern Mediterranean which was tipping dangerously toward Russia and its Arab clients.

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SECOND, there was the cease-fire agreement worked out by Kissinger with Leonid Brezhnev in Moscow. That agreement, by stipulating the need for early negotiations between Israel and the Arabs on a durable peace, was at least a step forward in the diplomatic rhetoric.

Third, was the defense alert ordered by the President when the Russians, in response to an Israeli breach of the cease-fire, suddenly switched their tone from conciliatory to very tough and threatened to establish a unilateral military presence.

But why were these three moves by the administration necessary at all? The answer lies in the administration's domestic difficulties.

When trouble first started in the Near East, the administration, despite evident signs of Soviet involvement, took no steps to block the Russians. In large part because the President's only claim to domestic support was an ability to get on with Russia, Kissinger kept sounding the themes of "detente" and the "structure of peace." As a result, the Russians gained an enormous initial advantage in the war. The President was obliged to set in motion full-scale aid to Israel as a desperation measure.

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KISSINGER'S diplomatic arrangement in Moscow was achieved largely thanks to Israeli arms which began to move forward when the supplies started rolling. Had Kissinger been willing to dally in Moscow, the ongoing success of the Israelis' arms could probably have given him the bargaining power for a much more detailed agreement. But he could not afford to linger because he needed a quick cease-fire to shore up Mr. Nixon at the time the affair of the tapes was unraveling the President's authority at home.

"As to the alert, it seems probable that the Russians were tempted to toughen their stand because of President Nixon's domestic weakness. And moreover, the President was in such difficult straits at home there was widespread suspicion he might be staging the alert to rally the country."

Even the most effective measures taken by the administration, in sum, would not have been necessary except for the staggering decline in Mr. Nixon's internal support.