

James Reston

It's Too Early To Talk of Permanent Peace

Washington

IN HIS PRIVATE briefing of congressional leaders on why he put the armed forces of the U.S. on world wide alert the other day, President Nixon took a decidedly pessimistic view of the Soviet Union's objectives in the Middle East.

If Moscow managed to get its seven airborne divisions into Egypt on the pretext of liberating the surrounded Egyptian Third Corps, he said, it would be hard to get them out of there again, and once established as the protectors of the Arab states, Moscow's influence on future shipments of oil would undoubtedly increase.

The United States, he added, was not dependent on Middle East oil; we could tighten our belts and live without it, but Japan and Europe got around 80 per cent of their oil from that part of the world, and he could imagine a situation in which Soviet domination of the Middle East might lead within five or ten years to the communization of both Japan and Western Europe.

This was an alarming picture indeed, and it persuaded the congressional leaders that the dramatic presidential military alert was justified by the magnitude of the threat, but it left a lot of troublesome unanswered questions.

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WHY, IF THE Soviet Union had such vast geopolitical aims, could he tell the press the following day that we had suddenly passed from "the most difficult crisis" since the Cuban missile alert to the most hopeful outlook in the Middle East in 20 years?

"I think I could safely say," he told the press, "that the chance for not just a cease-fire... but the outlook for a permanent peace is the best that it has been in 20 years."

All this still seems a bit extreme. Last month the official line here was that the "detente" between United States and the Soviet Union was building a "generation of peace," then a few mysterious actions by Moscow put the Strategic Air Command bombers with their nuclear weapons in the air, whereupon the crisis not only ended as fast as it began, but we are back talking about "permanent" peace.

There is developing here a pattern of exaggerated language, and sudden dramatic action. Nobody of course can know much about the Soviet Union's motives or intentions and it can be dangerous to assume its good will or faith, but visions of the communization of Europe and Japan require almost as vivid an imagination as "permanent" peace in the Middle East.

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ALSO, IT IS not at all clear what Mr. Nixon's next order would have been if the Soviets had decided to use their airborne divisions to get the Egyptian army out of the trap. Would he have tried to stop them? Or land American paratroops in Israel?

Not even the Israelis would have welcomed that. After all, it's not so long ago that the Soviets had about 20,000 men in Egypt, and instead of "going Communist," the Egyptians kicked them out.

Perhaps a more modest appraisal of U.S.-Soviet relations in the Middle East is in order.

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THE OUTLOOK, unfortunately, is not for "permanent" peace. Israel still wants secure borders, all the more so after the fourth war in a generation, and this means holding on to territory the Arabs are determined to get back.

Meanwhile, with Washington and Moscow playing international poker for their own interests, Israel finds herself in the awkward situation of having both the United States and the Soviet Union leaning on her to stop fighting whenever she gets close to destroying the armies that have attacked her.

In short the big power detente may work to stop wars when both want to stop them but it doesn't seem to prevent them, and the result of war every few years does not benefit the smaller Israeli state but clearly benefits the Arabs.

Nobody understands this better than Prime Minister Meir. When she was asked the other day whether the Israelis could afford more of this sort of thing, she replied: "Can we afford to live?" But she is not talking nonsense about "permanent peace." She has lived too long and suffered too much for that.

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