

# ... And the Diplomatic Valve

Saudi Arabia's austere King Faisal controls the oil valves which will determine how much Americans will shiver this winter. Only Saudi Arabia has the means to break the Arab oil embargo and ease the critical shortage facing the United States.

A prolonged boycott, according to Treasury experts, would cause severe economic dislocations. One Treasury study warns that a "major economic depression" would result if the supply disruption continues into the late 1970s.

Yet secret studies by the National Security Council show there's no practical way to start the oil flowing again if Faisal doesn't want to open the valves.

It will do little good to cut off food shipments to the Saudis. Faisal can afford to pay out of the kingdom's overflowing treasury whatever price it takes to purchase from other countries all the food his people need. The suggestion that Saudi Arabian assets in the West be frozen also won't likely work. The king shrewdly is providing oil to the countries where most of the oil billions are stashed.

As a last resort, of course, the National Security Council has considered military force. But the secret studies show that a military operation to take over the Saudi oil fields would be highly vulnerable to sabotage and interdiction. In any case, intelligence reports warn emphatically that the Saudis would sabotage their own wells be-

fore permitting them to be captured.

This leaves negotiation as the preferred, if not the only, way to fill America's ebbing oil tanks. Yet Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, in his secret talks with Faisal, failed to budge the shrewd old king.

Sources close to the negotiations say Kissinger is more skillful at world politics and power plays than he is at economics. Only as an afterthought did he invite an oil expert to participate in the National Security Council discussions on the Saudi predicament.

Kissinger also ignored advice that he talk to the oil minister who, it was suggested, would have been more inclined to help work out an accommodation. Instead, Kissinger with his sense of power dealt directly with the king who was polite but implacable.

Kissinger urged the king to resume oil shipments to the U.S. A continuing embargo, Kissinger argued, would only provide ammunition for the anti-Arab forces and generate anti-Arab sentiment in the U.S. This would make it difficult for him to follow the even-handed policy he desired in the Mideast, he said.

The soft-spoken Kissinger handled the discussion with his customary brilliance, and Faisal listened carefully to every word. Although he speaks English, he insists on Arabic for official occasions and, therefore, dealt with Kissinger through an interpreter. The secret session was formal and stuffy.

The king declared solemnly that he was willing not only to resume shipments but to increase them until the U.S. has all the oil it needs. But he cannot relax the oil squeeze, he said, until Israel begins to evacuate Arab territory taken in 1967. He reminded Kissinger of past, repeated warnings that unswerving U.S. support for Israel would bring oil sanctions. The king said he had been reluctant to take this action. It was clear from his remarks, however, that he felt personally insulted by Washington's failure to heed his warnings.

The irony is that Faisal, according to all accounts, has a soft spot for the U.S. Many key Saudi officials were educated in the U.S. Indeed, there's a good-natured rivalry between Saudis who attended colleges in northern and southern California. One of the king's own sons attended President Nixon's alma mater in Whittier, Calif.

Faisal is also fiercely anti-Communist. He is more eager than Nixon and Kissinger to keep Soviet influence out of the Mideast. But above all else, Faisal is a devout Moslem. He abstains from liquor, shuns leisure pleasures and prays five times a day. He is deeply serious about his traditional role as protector of the Moslem world's three holy cities—Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. The old king wants Jerusalem returned to Moslem custody. Before he dies, he wants to pray in the great mosque in Jerusalem.

But he is motivated, according to intelligence analyses, by more than religious devotion. He wants to halt the radical trend in the Arab world and to bring Arab affairs under the control of moderates. For this purpose, he has established a firm alliance with Egypt's President Sadat, who has turned from Russia to Saudi Arabia for financial support.

But Faisal cannot exercise a modifying influence on Arab affairs unless he leads the crusade to recover the lost Arab lands. His use of the oil valves as



King Faisal

a political weapon has made him the hero of the Arab world. It's not a status he wishes to give up.

The old king is determined, therefore, to tighten the oil vise until Israel is forced to retreat back to its 1967 borders. He believes that Israel cannot continue to resist world pressure. He is completely willing to accept Israel as a sovereign state provided a political settlement can be reached. If the Israelis won't accept this settlement, he is ready to bankroll another Arab war against Israel. From Washington, he wants a guarantee that the U.S. won't again arm Israel.

The more the National Security Council studies the alternatives, the more difficult it becomes to turn down Faisal's deal. The Agriculture Department is conducting a comprehensive study of food exports to Arab nations. Last year, the U.S. supplied about 15 per cent of Saudi Arabia's imported grain, a figure that is expected to exceed 20 per cent this year. But the Saudis are already sounding out other suppliers, in case the U.S. should retaliate against the oil embargo by cutting off grain shipments.

Secret studies indicate that the U.S. could probably seal off supplies from entering Saudi Arabia by military force. But a military operation across more than 8,000 miles of ocean would be a logistical nightmare. To take over the oil fields, the classified studies show, would be possible but impractical. The danger of sabotage and interdiction would be too great. Oil wells, pipelines and tankers, it is noted, are extremely vulnerable to attack.

It looks as if the U.S., therefore, will have to rely upon Kissinger's diplomatic skills.