

In Need of a Crisis

Some of us had trouble understanding why it should have triggered such a crisis six weeks ago when Communist Party Chief Leonid Brezhnev proposed sending a joint U.S.-Soviet force into the Mideast to enforce the cease-fire there.

We understood that it would be necessary to make some response to the Soviets' statement that they would consider going in unilaterally if the United States rejected the proposal, but the proposal itself didn't strike us as patently absurd.

As a result, some of us suspected that the President may have been exaggerating things when he ordered a worldwide alert of U.S. military forces to meet "the most difficult crisis we have had since the Cuban confrontation of 1962."

You remember that Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was full of measured outrage at the Soviet proposal. At his long news conference, following the military alert, he emphasized his government's unshakable opposition to the very notion.

"The United States does not favor, and will not approve, the sending of a joint Soviet-United States force into the Middle East," he said.

"It is inconceivable that we should transplant the great power rivalry into the Middle East, or, alternatively, that we should impose a military condominium by the United States and the Soviet Union."

You remember all that, of course. What you may not remember is this:

Said Brezhnev: "What is needed is not new provocations and subterfuges de-

signed to circumvent or violate the cease-fire agreement, but an honest observance of the agreement reached."

Brezhnev's remarks came three days after a startling suggestion by U.S. officials that Washington might be willing to join with the Soviet Union in policing the Mideast cease-fire. The idea of a joint Soviet-American guarantee for a negotiated settlement was offered by administration leaders at San Clemente during a background briefing of Western editors and publishers. . . .

Administration officials hastily emphasized that it was nothing but speculation and that the Russians had not even been consulted about the idea.

The italicized segment above is from Time magazine of Sept. 7, 1970.

Question: How did an idea generated within the highest levels of the Nixon administration in 1970 become not just "inconceivable" but a threat to world peace in 1973?

There may be other answers, but the one that occurs to me is that in the fall of 1970, Richard Nixon didn't need a crisis. Three years later, he needed something—anything—to get Watergate and the presidential tapes off Page 1.

Which, by the way, is one of the main reasons I have trouble believing in the current Page 1 story, the "energy crisis."

Just as with the Russian move in October, there is a serious situation with oil. And in the case of oil, the situation is intensified by the Arab embargo. But crisis? Perhaps. Or perhaps a need to get Rose Mary's Boo-Boo off the front pages.

The reason it is so hard for most of us to be that sure is that we don't have the information on which to base a reasoned decision. More disturbing, the government doesn't have the information either. The only people who know the truth about our domestic oil reserves are the people who stand to reap enormous profits from the "crisis."

And these are the people who supply the government with the data on which to base its policies. Doesn't it give you pause to consider that both the oil industry (financially) and the President (politically) stand to gain from the crisis?

Doesn't it strike you as interesting that the proposals for dealing with the crisis just happen to include most of the things the oil people have been asking for for years? Things like relaxing environmental protection regulations, for instance, or getting at offshore-oil.

If the oil industry's reserves were in as bad shape as they now insist, would they have been so adamantly opposed to increasing U.S. oil imports? We don't know the answer, of course. The oil people have all the information.

But how could any of this help the President? Surely creating a bogus national crisis won't transform him from a distrusted President into a trusted one.

The point is, because Americans tend to rally 'round in time of crisis, it may help him to avoid becoming an ex-President.