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The Growing Paralysis

With a Vice President safely installed, it is high time to examine the unique thesis on which the White House and the President's most bitter enemies are now in agreement. The thesis is that the Watergate horrors are not impeding, much less paralyzing, the vital functions of the U.S. government.

President Nixon and his staff have no alternative to maintaining that they are still able to carry on as usual. The more bitter presidential enemies have no alternative, either, since they actively and openly want the Watergate horrors to be prolonged to the utmost. But the whole thesis is a nonsense, a pretense, a demonstrable falsehood.

One proof that the government is being increasingly paralyzed in its most vital functions has just been offered in this space. In brief, the Soviet Union is now in open violation of the spirit of the first SALT agreement, as stated in a reservation made by the U.S. government when that agreement was signed. The violation takes the form of urgent Soviet preparations to deploy a much more powerful and weighty new generation of intercontinental missiles in the existing Soviet silos. The U.S. reservation concerned precisely this kind of development. The reservation was made, furthermore, with a view to possible U.S. denunciation of the SALT in case of need.

There is no doubt about the Soviet violation. There are plenty of U.S. policymakers who feel that denunciation of the agreement, therefore, ought to be considered, or at least threatened. But the matter is nonetheless in total abeyance. This is because the President gained much political credit from

SALT, and he is now too beleaguered to endanger that credit.

This proves what may be called negative paralysis. In the House vote that overrode the President's veto of the war powers act, positive paralysis was demonstrated some weeks ago. Very few people seem to realize it. Yet the war powers act amounts to an engraved invitation to Hanoi from the U.S. Congress to break every provision of the Vietnam accord and to resume the offensive in South Vietnam on a massive scale.

It is an engraved invitation to Hanoi, simply because the war powers act strikes from the President's hands all means of effective retaliation, if Hanoi decides—as is highly likely—to tear up the accord negotiated with such difficulty. Quite enough members of the House saw this point to resist the fashionable pressures favoring the war powers act. Thus the White House was able to collect a large margin of House commitments to sustain the veto.

When the vote was taken, however, no less than 20 members broke their pledged words—a really unheard-of development in a case of this sort. Thus the President's veto was narrowly overridden. The engraved invitation went to Hanoi. The Republican leaders of the House freely admit that so many members' promises proved so worthless because of the poisoned atmosphere engendered by the Watergate horrors.

A third facet of the government's increasing paralysis is revealed by the situation regarding the defense budget for next year. Because of the brand-new generation of Soviet missiles, and

indeed for many other reasons, a really massive increase in defense spending is now urgent. At present, because of the huge pay-bill for the volunteer army, the bulk of our defense money is going for men, not armed strength.

Meanwhile, the balance of military power between the United States and the U.S.S.R. is getting more and more disastrously unfavorable to the United States. We have before us the lessons of the hasty postwar demobilization, of the disarmament under Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson, and the second disarmament in the early Eisenhower years. The Soviets responded to these three episodes of the American folly with the Berlin blockade, with the aggression in Korea, and with the second Berlin crisis that was only liquidated by the Cuban missile crisis.

Heaven knows, then, what we are to expect from an inferiority of power far, far greater than the kind of thing that produced these former Soviet responses. The President is well aware of this, too. Before the Watergate horrors became quite so horrible, he asked Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger to make contingency plans for a larger defense budget.

But now that necessary rectification of our situation has, of course, gone by the board—because of the creeping Watergate paralysis. Furthermore it is idiotic to suppose that this increasing paralysis of the U.S. government has not been happily noticed by the Kremlin, just as the Kremlin has noticed with joy the change in the power balance. Hence a time of utmost danger has all but certainly begun.

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