

Triumph-- and tragedy

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The Egyptian-Israeli accord for separation of their armed forces in the Suez Canal area is another stunning diplomatic triumph for Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Without his persistence and persuasive genius such a pact may well never have been reached.



W. R. Hearst Jr.

Few military situations have ever been so unstable and potentially eruptive as the confused intermingling of hostile forces left by the recent Yom Kippur War. It was remarkable, in fact, that the shaky United Nations' cease-fire held as well and as long as it did.

The fact that only sporadic shooting occurred was, in essence, still another personal tribute to the indefatigable Dr. Kissinger. More than anything else it was the pragmatic arguments made in his repeated shuttle trips to belligerent capitals which stayed the outbreak of new mass violence — trips in

Still another... Jerusalem, which Israel's religious feelings to the contrary are turning the city into an international zone. It would seem a sensible solution, but the emotions in this issue transcend the practical.

So a permanent Mideast peace is still a long way off. All we can do is hope that the momentum toward compromise which has been created by American initiative will continue.

It is important to remember that the gifted Dr. Kissinger has a boss who picked him and personally directs his activities. Richard M. Nixon is that man, and it is his policy of laboring actively for a generation of international peace which the Secretary of State has been following with such notable success in Vietnam, Peking, Moscow and now the Mideast.

There is a bitter irony here. At the very time when new worldwide accolades are being heaped on the President and his minister, Mr. Nixon at home is up to his neck in the hottest hot water since the Watergate scandal broke open, and this time it is hard to see how he can possibly extricate himself.

Regular readers of this column know that I have tried to support the President in every way possible through his domestic political ordeal. It has been stressed that he has been the victim of a vicious, concerted and determined drive to oust him from office—which is true. The propriety of assuming innocence in the absence of a formal guilty verdict has been emphasized repeatedly.

That propriety still pertains. Still—and it would be foolish to pretend otherwise — the disclosure this week that 18½ minutes of a key Watergate tape had been manually

erased by from five to nine separate operations came as a body-blow shocker. There is no doubt that the erasure was deliberate and that it was done after the tape had been subpoenaed as evidence, which makes somebody guilty of criminally obstructing justice.

The erasure, significantly, covered a conversation that the President had on June 20, 1972, with H. R. Haldeman, then his chief of staff. The talk admittedly dealt with the break-in three days earlier at the Watergate Democratic National Headquarters and what posture the Republican administration should take. Mr. Nixon ever since has vehemently denied any personal knowledge of cover-up activities.

I have always tried to give him the benefit of the doubt and suspicions cast by his persecutors. But in this case, at this late day, it is simply stretching the credulity of the strongest supporter to the breaking point. That tape was erased by somebody in the White House, somebody very close to the President, and it is almost beyond belief that it could have been done without his knowledge or permission.

Far be it from me to play judge and jury, or to suggest he was personally responsible for the erasure. After all, it is just possible that a too zealous aide, anxious to save his chief possible embarrassment, did it on his own volition. This is bending way over backward, of course, but it's being done for the sake of the nation's highest office.

I hope it happened that way, despite full knowledge that people frequently go to extraordinary extremes to protect their self-image. It is an all too human failing and very few of us are morally justified in casting stones when it occurs. The difficulty here is that a serious crime has been committed.

How it will turn out is anybody's guess. The drive for impeachment clearly has been given new impetus. And a president elected with an overwhelming landslide vote only 14 months ago has suffered still another major loss to credibility already near rock bottom in his own country.

It's all a terrible mess. President Nixon undoubtedly is in the worst fix domestically he has ever been in, even if he escapes impeachment — as he may well do. The important fact is, unhappily, that he stands accused by the majority of his countrymen as a leader who has been considerably less than honest and forthright with them.

Again I stress the irony.

Abroad, Mr. Nixon's Watergate woes and failings are considered as nothing compared with his record as a world peacemaker. Aboard he is respected and applauded.

At home, Mr. Nixon's Watergate troubles take top priority and his role of international leadership gets very little credit. In his own country he is doubted and attacked.

Future historians will have a tough time explaining the contradictions.

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