

Joseph Alsop

SALT II: Agreement Unlikely

"Essential equivalence" is now the official description of the American objective in the new round of talks on strategic arms limitations. Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger and Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger have sworn solemn oaths to one another to aim for "essential equivalence" and to take nothing less.

The SALT negotiators have been so instructed. Thus the considerable period has ended when the U.S. government had no agreed position concerning the next round of SALT. But it has to be admitted that, short of a miracle, anything like a real agreement based on "essential equivalence" will be all but impossible to obtain from the Soviets.

There are two cardinal points that weigh against a future SALT agreement that would represent a genuine Soviet-American balance in strategic weapons. To begin with, the U.S. SALT negotiators are now heavily handicapped by the fact that the first SALT agreement, so loudly applauded in the United States, did not remotely begin to represent "essential equivalence."

This was partly the result of gross American official underestimation of Soviet progress in weaponry. It was concluded, for example, that the Soviets could not possibly produce a submarine-launched ballistic missile with anything like the range of the American Trident. Yet the first SALT agreement was hardly signed when just such a missile was tested by the Soviets.

More generally, and in all sorts of additional ways, intangible U.S. technological advantages were falsely counted upon to compensate for the enormous tangible advantages allowed to the Soviets in the vital area of missile power and missile numbers. To the foregoing arguments from false assumptions, however, another quite realistic argument was added by Dr. Kissinger.

Given the character of the former U.S. defense program and the former Defense Department leadership, there was little likelihood of a sudden surge of U.S. effort when the first SALT agreement was signed. We had no plans then and we had no means then to do what we promised not to do in SALT I. So it was persuasively and realistically argued that the agreement gave nothing away that had not been given away already.

Unhappily, that does not alter the present handicap resulting from SALT I. Whenever one unequal agreement has been signed with the Soviets, they have always automatically assumed that gross inequality, favoring them, has thus become a matter of right. This rule was sadly underlined by the extreme inequality of the first Soviet proposals for the second round of SALT.

When you have given an inch, and have had a mile taken, it is always vastly harder to get back on a sound basis. In the present instance, the problem is made much, much worse by

the second cardinal point mentioned above. In brief, as anyone can see from the new Soviet missile programs, the Soviet military lost nothing whatever by the first SALT agreement.

It can be strongly argued in fact that the Soviet defense minister, Marshall Andrei Grechko, and his colleagues actually made great gains from SALT I. They went on getting every ruble they could possibly have demanded to forge ahead with every kind of lavish defense improvement. Meanwhile the Western nations got a large dose of tranquilizers — which Marshall Grechko can hardly have minded.

At this juncture, however, one thing is already abundantly clear. The Soviet military are surely going to suffer where they mind suffering most—in the future scale of their defense investments—if the U.S. SALT negotiators seriously insist upon "essential equivalence." You now have a position, in fact, where nothing like "essential equivalence" can possibly be attained *except* at the expense of the Soviet military and their projects.

This will require a further development that is extremely improbable. General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev will have to get exceptionally tough with Marshall Grechko, who is more like his "closest comrade in arms" than his chief sparring partner in the Kremlin. You can see, then, why miracles are now required for another SALT agreement.