

Joseph Alsop WXPPost

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The Soviet Response to Impeachment

In case no one has noticed it, the Soviet leaders have been playing with fire in Syria. It is probably over now, but there is no question that the Soviets gave the Syrians every possible encouragement to attack the Israelis in the Mount Hermon area.

This was playing with fire, because the Israelis are exceedingly short-fused in such matters. They would have been shelling the city of Damascus (as they easily can, any time) within hours after the Syrians had inflicted major damage. So what would the Soviets have done then? Come to the aid of the Syrians, for instance? You can see that the fire the Soviets played with was potentially furnace-hot.

This means, in turn, that anyone who frivolously hankers for the President's impeachment is also playing with fire. For instance, one of the more partisan inhabitants of the grisly Groves of Academe, Dr. Henry Steele Commager, lately announced on television that there was no reason to fear impeachment.

Dr. Commager even described the President's impeachment, in effect, as no worse than one of those spring-tornics old-fashioned parents used to give their children, to purge the staleness of the winter. But even Dr. Commager would realize he was talking through his fairly pompous hat, if he were capable of learning the lesson of the recent troubles on the Syrian border. The lesson is simple enough. The

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Soviets took quite serious risks by pushing the Syrians into a fight they lost. All Soviet calculations of risk mainly depend, however, on the Kremlin's current estimate of American strength or weakness. The Syrian episode therefore indicates that even before impeachment, the Kremlin correctly estimates that the U.S. has already been gravely weakened by Watergate.

There are also two further sets of facts to consider here. One set concerns the sordid and shocking response in many quarters, when the Soviets overtly threatened to deal with Israel by sending their own ground troops into the Yom Kippur war. The President courageously responded with a worldwide military alert, and he was the bitterly criticized for “trying to create a diversion” from Watergate. So what would happen in comparable circumstances, with the President actually being tried by the Senate?

The other set of facts concerns the way the Soviets have invariably re-

sponded, almost in the manner of Pavlov's dogs, to the recurrent temptation of this country's seeming-weakness. The results have been the Berlin blockade, the Korean war and the second Berlin crisis. But just add impeachment's inevitable paralysis of the U.S. government to the other current U.S. weaknesses! The temptation for the Kremlin to get tough will then be vastly greater than ever before.

For that very reason, discreet studies are already under way by Pentagon planners, of the various ways the Kremlin might get tough during this summer or autumn. One may be sure that even in the top secret papers that have to be hand-carried by colonels, there is not so much as mention the word, “impeachment.” But it is certain also, that the studies were launched in fear of future weakness, and because of the effects on the Kremlin of tempting American weakness in the past.

The studies have produced a formidable list of danger points. One of them, for instance, is in Eastern Europe. Here

the Soviet leaders might well like a chance to tidy up Yugoslavia and Romania by putting a suitable end to these countries' inconvenient independence.

Another, much more likely danger point is the Mideast. The Soviet playing with fire in Syria indicates that the Kremlin leaders have the Mideast very much on their minds. The potential prize in the Mideast is enormous. The last months have taught us, in fact, that any great power controlling the world oil tap in the Persian Gulf, will also control the whole world. In the Mideast however, the Soviets are not quite ready for really drastic action—unless the impeachment-caused U.S. paralysis is demonstrably total, in which case anything will be safe.

Finally, there is the Chinese border, where the Soviets have spent such fortunes preparing for a preventive attack. At present, the odds against such an attack are probably about 70-30. But if the president is impeached, the chance of the attack will surely double — making the odds 60-40 in favor.

Even 60-40 in favor is no sure thing, but only a fool would double the chance of so terrible a development without a compelling need to do so. Maybe that need will unhappily arise, if there is clear evidence of the President's personal involvement in his former underling's criminality. Even so, impeachment can never resemble a spring tonic.